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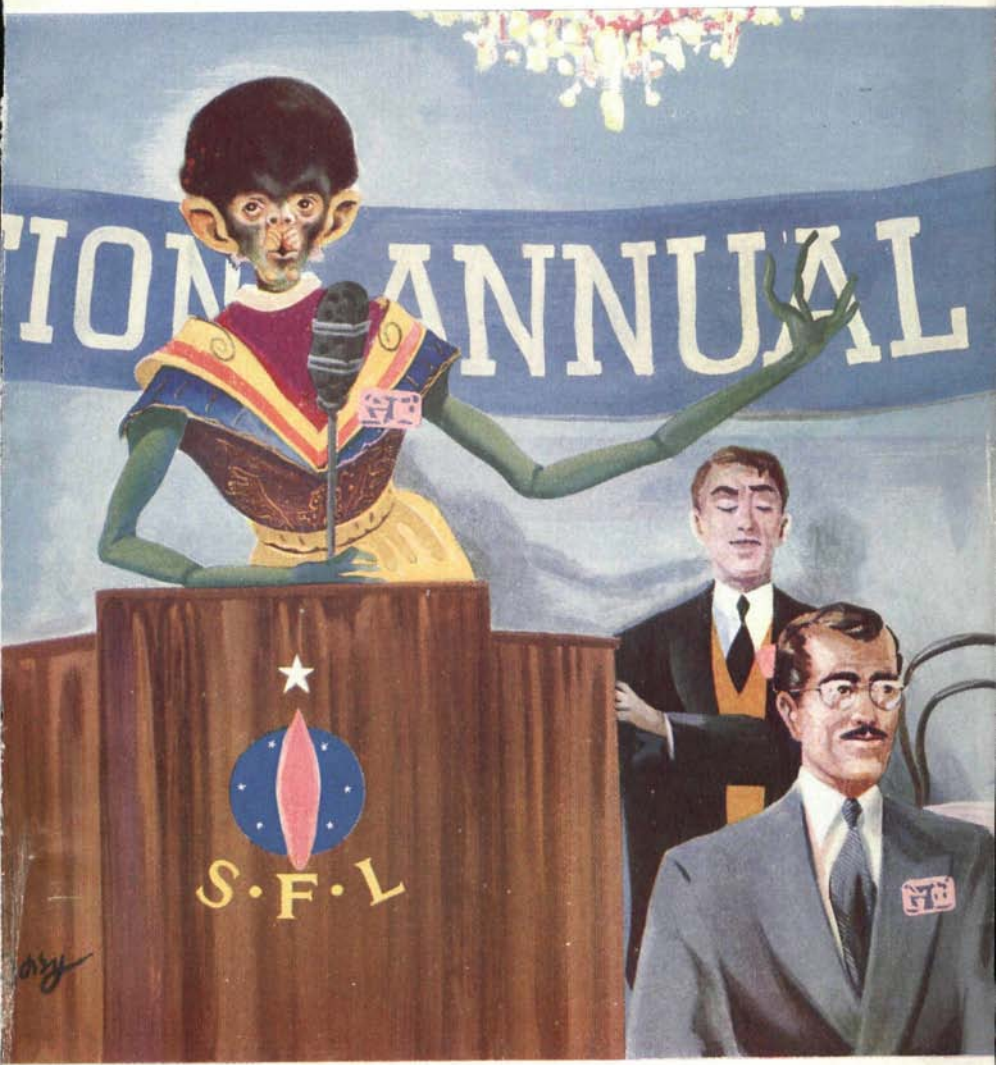

15th WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

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Dan Morgan

Spalding

In commenting upon his first attempt at a novel-length story, Dan Morgan writes : "One of my aims as a science fiction writer is to produce the kind of story that I, as a reader, like. That makes it pretty tough, because I'm an old and tired fan—but it's fun trying.

"The original germ of the story was the complete visualisation of the scene in Chapter One of the finished story. The whole thing was there, just as vividly as if I had witnessed it personally. But one scene doesn't make a novel. From there on I had to find out the where, how, and why of the things that were happening. After kicking it around for a couple of months I thought I had most of the answers and started writing the story. But when I'd got halfway through the old tired fan raised his grizzled head in a long howl and made me scrap the lot—except for the first scene, which even had *him* interested. Then finally I got down to writing the story again, and this time it began to fit together without the seams showing.

"I have always wanted to write something with an esp theme. I believe that the human mind may yet yield the richest store of untapped treasure in the universe. There's been a lot of argument about telepathy, one way or another. But anybody who has been married for any length of time will tell you that it is an established fact. There comes a time when you just *know* what the other person is thinking. The spoken word is just a small part of language ; all the time communication is going on between human beings by other methods, and one of these could very easily be telepathy."

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MONTHLY

SEPTEMBER 1957

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover painting by TERRY symbolising the World Science Fiction Convention

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Final Convention News

At the time this issue of *New Worlds* will be on sale in Great Britain there will only be seven days to go before the 15th World Science Fiction Convention opens in London. Even from four weeks away (as this is being written) there is an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation as long-range plans take final shape and Londoners prepare for the influx of visitors from the provinces and overseas.

It will certainly be the greatest Convention ever held in this country and there is every possibility that it will be the most outstanding World Convention yet presented, despite the organisational abilities of the various American Committees who were responsible for the previous fourteen conclaves.

The outstanding personality amongst a host of eminent science fictionists will be Guest of Honour John W. Campbell, Jr., who has been editing America's *Astounding Science Fiction* for the past twenty years and who was, before that, a noted writer of short stories and novels in the genre. Undoubtedly, Mr. Campbell has done more in the development of authors and new ideas during his two decades as an editor than any other person—it will therefore be a supreme pleasure to welcome him and his wife on their first visit to our shores and have him as the focal point of the Convention.

Delegates are coming from a wide variety of places—the radius exceeds 9,000 miles ! Apart from the 55-seater charter plane of Americans, others are coming independently by sea and air. Late news informs that Arthur Clarke and colleague Mike Wilson, experts on astronautics and aqualung diving, are flying in from Ceylon ; authors H. Beam Piper arriving from Paris and Mack Reynolds from Spain. There will be delegates from Sweden, Germany, Belgium, Holland and France.

This year, too, the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund brings the first American delegate on a passage-paid trip to represent the amateur writing and publishing fields of U.S.A.—Robert A. Madle of Virginia having been chosen by vote to fill this honour. Readers may remember that British author Kenneth Bulmer (at that time an amateur) represented Britain at the 1955 World Convention held in Cleveland, Ohio.

The influx of delegates from far and near prompts me to issue a warning to such readers who have not as yet joined the World Science Fiction Society (the sponsoring body for

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this Convention) and who are perhaps planning on " dropping in " sometime during the activities. You might find it will be " standing room only " at the main sessions on Saturday and Sunday. Even at this early date accommodation in the Convention hotel is completely booked up and late-comers are having to sleep in an adjacent hotel.

The programme for the four days is nearly complete but at this moment details have not yet been released by the Programme Committee pending last minute alterations. I can, however, inform you that the film chosen for showing is *Mr. Wonderbird*, a remarkable animated fantasy which has not been generally released in Britain or U.S.A. This French film won an award at a recent Vienna Film Festival (not Cannes as I stated in the June Editorial) and most of the voices are those of well-known British actors and actresses—Peter Ustinov, Claire Bloom, Denholm Elliott, and others. This will be shown sometime on Sunday evening.

Friday evening's brief formal opening ceremony has been arranged in an interesting and novel manner and incorporates the now-traditional handing over the gavel from last year's Chairman to this. Saturday's official sessions open with an inaugural luncheon, followed by speeches from many celebrities. Later in the day the Achievement Awards will be presented. Apart from the various serious sessions interspersing the programming there will be many opportunities for lighter entertainment. Late Saturday evening, for instance, a Fancy Dress Parade will be held with prizes for the best futuristic costumes, probably followed by a dance into the early hours.

Sunday and Monday are also days filled with activity, both professional and amateur. However, if you live in the British Isles and are *not* going to be able to attend the big event you should hear quite a lot about it one way or the other. It is too early to forecast how much publicity will arise from this unique Convention, but I suggest that you watch your newspapers during the days preceding Convention-time, keep an eye on B.B.C. television on Monday evening, September 9th, and look for *Pathe Pictorial* movie magazine in colour after the Convention ends. Anything can happen !

John Carnell

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During the past twelve months author Kenneth Bulmer has been steadily building a reputation as one of our brightest younger writers. Certainly he has developed a versatility of style which readers are appreciating (as well as editors). This month's story by him is as different again to his recent contributions.

MISSION ONE HUNDRED

By Kenneth Bulmer

Final briefing an hour before takeoff. *It's starting quietly enough—too quietly. I know enough to know I should be feeling scared. That'll come. Some of the ninety-nine were rip-snorting missions before we ever left base.*

Norton Bradley, Flux Navigator first class, looked over the heads of the other fluxmen at the illuminated plot board in briefing. The proposed mission route was shown as a red line extending from base ship to Eight's atmosphere, a silver halo peppered with the black dots of enemy watch stations.

The Briefing Room was quiet, a sort of waiting, easy-paced, slow-breathing quietness. A few fluxmen trod out their cigarettes. Noises had brittle, staccato sharpness, rattling from metal walls under the fluorescents.

You can feel the life of base ship around you. My century. One hundredth mission, riding a flux wagon through hell. This one. I'll make it all right—or will I? Pray I don't flunk out like some of those other mission-final ninety-nine hoodoo men.

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Chairs scraped. Throats were cleared and the rash of coughing died away. The Briefing Officer strode onto the platform under the chart. Leader Kurtven. Tall, hard, unable to comprehend failure.

Kurtven looked around at the gathered fluxmen, the navigator and captains and second pilots. *Machines.* His mind resolved the old argument. *But better than machines. Human beings indoctrinated with the impassive skill of machinery and retaining their essential differences. That gives them their strength.*

And of all Earth's fighting forces, fluxmen perhaps most of all needed strength. In Leader Kurtven that strength showed itself in the way his mind could blank off any rational thoughts of sending men out into the Valley of the Shadow, without great expectation that many would return, and still retain his own austere sanity.

In Norton Bradley the strength flowed from his conviction that he would see through his one hundred missions, complete his century, and then ship home to Earth and Moira. It was an unusual conviction, he was aware; fluxmen carried on a running tote on their chances of survival. Losers were not around to settle in person, but they paid up by pre-deposited stakes. Unusual. Every fluxman in the room betted; every single one thought he'd make it.

How many believed that?

Earthmen had spilled into interstellar space and had found there other races with different ethics, different ways of looking at things; but all on similar levels of technological development. When the time was ripe, when the race had achieved certain scientific skills, then the race exploded into space.

Like here, on Gideon's fifty planets. A hundred light-years from Earth in this swirling, confused whirlpool of a system, Men had run head on into the Octos—the only name they had, given in derision as a nickname stemming from frightened fantasies in men's minds, because no-one had ever seen the aliens outside their interceptors and fighting ships.

And both races wanted the rich planets around Gideon. So the Octos started out from the sun and the Earthmen worked in from the perimeter until they met in a vaguely defined area where planets were battled for like nuggets of gold in the old days.

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With Leader Kurtven up there waiting to speak, you could feel the pressures of the base ship merging in your mind. A hundred light years from Earth. Below this complex of Briefing Rooms and barracks and machine shops and administration decks and hospital wards, deep in the warm guts of the Base ship, lay the Fluxwagons, waiting.

How big was the Base Ship? *As big as the world, as big as your bunk with its electric blanket and reading lamp.*

The fluxwagons were the only concrete realities in the world. Forty foot long, with control compartments above and the sealed-off bomb bays beneath, they looked like ranks of eggs in a packing factory. Eggs laid by the base ship to go winging across interplanetary space in towards the sun and Octo strongholds and there to lay their own eggs of death upon some Octo fortress or citadel . . .

Which one this time? They all had coded Earth names. *Aylestone—or Piombino on Twelve? No, hit them both last week. Stahlheim on Eight? God, no! Luxor? Dover on Eleven? Karnak? Probably one of that ring. A dirty one for my century. Bound to be sticky.* Bradley's thoughts jangled.

Kurtven looked over the fluxmen and tried not to see their faces. "All right, gentlemen. Destination this mission you already know." His face crinkled. "You've been there before."

Norton Bradley's hands began to shake. He thrust them into his pockets, looked around furtively. *Not Stahlheim! Not for my final mission!* It was almost a prayer. *What'll Clark say to this?*

Around him a subdued, suddenly growing and then cut short chorus of groans and boos broke out. Letting the tensions go. Making a joke out of it.

"Stahlheim!" A pudgy second pilot was hamming it up. "I gotta table reservation for a lobster dinner with a suhweet li'l Octo gal."

"Not Stahlheim again?"

"You goin' play footsie with yoh li'l Octo gal?"

"We won't take up graveyard space, anyway."

They were laughing now, letting it flow. Big joke. Stahlheim. Octo main base on Eight.

We lost ten flux-wagons there last mission. Octos just knocked 'em out cold. Just my luck.

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Bradley took his hands from his pockets. He was over the shakes now. He pulled his clip-board forward and ungraciously set about compiling course data. *I know this route in my sleep*! The thought didn't make him any happier. So did the Octos.

Clark, his captain, arrived at last. He opened the Briefing Room door, shot a quick look around, sneaked over.

Now what?

"Wagon's washed out, Nort." Clark spread his hands. "Crew can't ready her in time."

Bradley put his clip board down slowly. There was a shingly roar pounding in his ears. *Am I relieved*? *Next mission might not be so tough. Or am I just plain annoyed*? *Another damned wait for my century. One hundred missions and out. Then home. Earth—and Moira.*

Clark was staring at him, his mouth lop-sided with the feeling of what he was going to have to say next.

"You're riding with M84, Nort."

"M84." Re-orienting his emotions, he was bemused. "That's John Leonides, isn't it?" he said at last.

"Check. A fine skipper and a good wagon. They've done 53 missions."

"Fifty-three!" Bradley said disgustedly. "Just over the hump, now they're on the up-hill climb." He felt bitter. "Know-it-alls. Careless through over-confidence. Hell, skipper. Do I have to go?"

"Sorry, Nort. That's they way it is."

"I'm not trying to dodge, skipper. You know that. I'll finish my century. But can't I wait for the old M43?"

"Sorry, Nort."

Bradley's hands were growing damp.

He thinks I'm scared. Hell—he knows I'm scared! *The whole crazy lot of us are scared, terrified right down past our stomachs. Life expectancy—five minutes out of flux over enemy planets. But flying my last mission with a slap-happy crew in the fifties*! *I'll make out—I've got to make out.*

Clark left. Bradley returned his attention to the plot board by an effort of will. Around this sun Gideon, an F-plus type star, swirled fifty planetary sized bodies and an intermixed mass of celestial debris. The territory so far claimed by Earth consisted of eleven planets of the outer shell.

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Octos dominated all the rest save for half a dozen in dispute between the two spheres of interest.

Kurtven depressed a switch on the console and an ironic cheer went up as the blue lamp on planet Eight lit up. Stahlheim. With his mood, Bradley could smell the fear in the room like an unhealthy miasma.

There were twenty-two crews in the room. How many would come back? Using men as machines was a fine idea, unless you happened to be one of the men being used.

Damn the war, anyway. It's senseless fighting an interstellar war on fronts like this, you expend near enough a planet's resources gaining a new one.

Kurtven talked, hard-lipped.

"I don't need to tell you the importance of hitting Stahlheim. You'll be running up against first-class opposition, so bring your wagons out of flux right on the button, you navigators. A second either way . . . Pilots, make your atmosphere runs snappy. Get those bombs off like clockwork. Make this mission a one-two-three cert."

He went off into details of known enemy fighter installations and inferred flux-watch stations.

Bradley knew all about that. The longer you took running through the atmosphere the longer they had to knock you down. The flux field was a fine idea—you duck into it like an invisibility cloak—but you have to shuck the cloak near a planetary atmosphere. You have to step out high and handsome and drop your rocket bombs and get to hell out of it.

As a navigator I have to pull the wagon out of flux right on the rim of the air. Go in fast with the bombardment boys doing their stuff like crazy—then up and out. If we're lucky.

"Any questions?" Kurtven stared round. "No? Well, good luck, gentlemen."

Good luck for the men of Earth in their jaunt to kill men who were aliens of another solar system. Maybe when a race achieved interstellar travel they reached a stage of personal extinction. Maybe a growth factor operated which shut down mental power. Maybe people blew up—with or without outside help—as soon as they reached the stars.

Bradley picked up his clip board and went to find John Leonides and M84.

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The base ship was like a big broody hen sitting on an ever changing family of wayward chicks. The big ship swung her orbit in real space at the end of a hyperspace run from Earth, acting as a focal point between Earth and the colonised planets of this system. Fresh fluxmen and flux-wagons were funnelling in all the time. The striking force was being built up.

And men were dying quicker still out there in Octo space.

Mission one hundred. Stahlheim.

Bradley tried not to think that it was the final mission. It wasn't healthy. Machines had no emotions, so they'd been taught at school; homo sapiens is the most perfect machine ever devised, so eradicate its irritating and confusing emotions and, presto ! a new machine.

Machine, general purpose, mark infinity.

John Leonides was big of body and limbs, with a tiny head perched roughly in the centre of enormous shoulders. His face was lined. It twitched with the same nervous tensions that made all fluxmen's faces twitch.

Bradley found him standing wide-legged looking up at M84 nestled in her launching slot like an egg in a packing factory. The flux-wagons were egg-shaped, featureless matrices of wiring, containing pile and flux-drive and standard rocket propulsors. If they didn't have a mess of killer torpedoes, anti-torpedo torps, distorter torps, singing mines and detection equipment hung around them, they'd be dead ringers for an Easter parade.

Bradley had his usual thought when he saw a flux-wagon.

Like a fat man hidden by Christmas parcels.

" Navigator Bradley ? "

" Reporting for duty with M84, skipper."

Odd—and unsettling—to call this stranger ' skipper '.

Leonides nodded perfunctorily, resumed his upward gaze. Then, as though remembering, he shook hands. His palm was clammy, unpleasant.

Like mine, Bradley thought without resentment.

Leonides said without looking down: " Missed you in briefing. I don't have to say I'm sorry you're riding with a crew strange to you." He tilted his head, looked at Bradley with filmed, grey eyes. They went through Bradley. " I like a snappy wagon. No loose ends."

A sharp, stumbling clatter of feet on the metal treads brought them both round. The Radio Officer who approached had fair hair, receding chin, spots. His uniform was crumpled.

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The look of shy eagerness in his face made Bradley almost physically ill.

Not nineteen. First mission, you can't mistake that. Probably a little-wizard inside a radio. Keen.

" I'm Radio Officer Larsen, sir. Reporting aboard."

" Very good, Larsen. You'd better check your board."

Leonides shook hands, feeling the hot dryness of the youngster's fingers. He nodded up towards the M84.

For my sins. Green. As green as his face'll be when we hit flux. But I'll mould him, I'll fit him into the wagon's pattern, if I have to break every bone in his body. This is going to be one hell of a run. This navigator they've sicced on me hates my guts, and the wagon's, too. A ninety-nine hoodoo man !

Leonides turned his back on Bradley and began to climb the vertical steel ladder into the ventral hatch. Bradley slung his clipboard and instruments, started after the big man. Straight up the ladder, squeeze through the hole like a rivet, push up with arms and stand up in the lock. *They don't make these wagons to be got out of in a hurry.*

The wagon was about him now, like a living entity, like an egg, with its bits of humanity like germs squirming at playing machines, living with the billious taste of fear in their mouths. Fear was built into a flux-wagon.

He went forward, found his navigation cubby, opening off the rear of the pilot compartment with its twin seats like thrones. That was the only space that was not free of instruments. He began the pre-flighting.

The speaker on the bulkhead squawked. Leonides' voice came through, still harsh over the distortion.

" Captain checking. Do you hear ? "

In order, the crew responded.

" Second pilot, checking. Bombadier checking. *Navigator* checking. Radio Officer checking. Engineer One checking. Engineer Two checking."

" Roger," Leonides' voice came flat and hard.

" Call for us, skipper." Larsen's voice squeaked with his desire to remain matter-of-fact. " Outside extension."

Leonides stopped his pre-flighting, flicked on the landline outer connection. A face jumped into focus. Kurtven.

" Flux Leader Leonides. An extra assignment for you."

" I've already got a hoodoo nav and a green radio——" Leonides began. He chopped that off, sat biting his lips. *Wrong. Wrong attitude. Men were better than machines, he*

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knew that. It was part of life. This strangling feeling had to be thrown off, this terror distending his guts that he'd break down, go on the blink, become inoperative. This man Leonides, himself, this person who was himself, had to remain functioning.

Kurtven spoke from the screen.

" Public relations photographer coming aboard you for this mission, John. Pretty pictures for home consumption. Make like a bunch of heroes."

A disgusted noise came over the intercom. Someone of the crew had a low opinion of P.R. photographers.

Leonides said: " Wilco. Out."

" Out." Kurtven's face faded. Almost immediately Bradley, his nose at his navigation charts and logs, forgot the incident. Taking a flux-wagon through that patent vanishing cabinet and bringing her out right on the button demanded all his concentration.

The flight control sections were like a chattering bird-house. Equipment clustered thickly in every available inch of space, relays clicking, lights flicking on and off carrying their tell-tales of readiness-information. The tension mounted.

Bradley secured his nav section, swung out through the bottom hatch, dropped onto the catwalk and lay prone on his ventral firing position. He carried out a pre-flight of the defensive armament. Directly forward of him, through the tunnel under his nav compartment and the pilots' section, he could see the bombadier pre-flighting the forward defensive positions.

The bombadier turned, saw him, began to wriggle back down the tunnel.

" I'm Duke Washington," the negro said, extending a hand. " Welcome aboard."

" Thanks." Bradley took the proffered hand.

" Guess the skipper forgot that," Washington said. His dark face, strong in shadowed and highlighted planes where illumination caught it, carried a brooding strength.

" Yes. He did." Bradley swallowed hard. " What's eating him, anyway ? "

" You'll get used to it. Machinery is his god, and man is his supreme achievement in the mechanical line. He doesn't like inefficiency." Washington smiled, breaking the sombreness enfolding them. " He's a good guy; but he's got a one-track mind."

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"I'll remember." Bradley watched as the negro worked his way forward again.

The speaker hitched to a wall bracket squawked.

"Mario, open up the hatch. We've got company."

Looking over his shoulder Bradley saw the Engineer Two drop from the engine room hatch onto the catwalk, operate the outer lock valves. This would be the photographer. According to tradition, it should be a girl, preferably a blonde, with long legs.

Bradley caught at the rail, hung on for a long moment, fighting the tension churning in his stomach. His last mission.

A century. And they're doing everything they can to foul it up.

Without waiting to see who or what the P.R. photographer was, he swung up into his nav cubby again. There, at least, he could find a measure of comfort. Which was a twisted around way of thinking, if you like.

The minutes were ticking away now. Twenty-two flux-wagons, going on a kick to Stahlheim. What did you do in the war, daddy?

I was sick scared to my stomach, son.

Percentage of fluxmen completing a hundred missions 24.5. Nice odds.

He checked his nav plot again. Got to come out on the button, without fumbling. Those Octo watch stations can fling a mine into the flux field close enough to blow you apart nine times out of ten. That's even before you hit real space again and traject across atmosphere. His sweatband inside his helmet ring was sodden already. He changed it. He fumbled the fastenings. Hell—his nerves were shot. Riding a century mission with a crew of slap-happy fifties!

The ten minute buzzer sounded.

Twenty-one other flux-wagons were tightening up, now around him in the base ship one hundred and fifty-four fluxmen were feeling that same tightening up around their eyes and hearts and guts. Oh—and a P.R. photographer.

There was a twist to that 24.5 percentage. Over half of those came out nut cases.

Tension pulsed. Little sounds magnified. The four clocks for the different time rates thumped out of phase, coming together in a maddeningly irritating rhythm.

Five minutes.

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Engineer One put his head into the nav cubby.

" Abu Bekr. Howdy."

" Norton Bradley." He was at a loss for words. Finally: " Nice wagon you've got here."

Bekr's face lightened. " Sweet wagon, yessir." He touched a shrunken Venus lizard's leg. " And Cuthbert here will keep it that way. Not that I'm superstitious, you understand. Call it insurance."

" I know. My skipper always carried a girl's compact. He mislaid it one trip—we lost a radio officer and an engineer—oh, sorry."

The Arab smiled, a little too tightly.

" 'Sall right. Leonides'll pull us through. Man's a machine."

" So I observe."

Three minutes sounded.

Abu Bekr made a face. " I'd better get back to that photographic harpie. Cheers."

He vanished aft. Bradley checked his log for the last time. The computer read the same. He fed the tapes into the master control and cleared it with the second pilot. Now it was up to the front office.

They seem a decent crew. Wonder who I'm replacing?

Two minutes.

A scrablling noise from the hatch. Bradley looked down, saw what appeared to be a greying monk's tonsorial scalp-scaping rising. An extremely short, round-bodied man with high-coloured face squeezed into the nav cubby.

" All right, all right," he began at once. " So I know I'm crazy. And I know all fluxmen are nuts, too. I'm just here to take pictures."

One minute.

" Sit tight, pal, and ride out the launch nice and easy." Bradley pushed him into the second seat. " Hold it in until we hit space."

" Say—I don't want to ride herd on any of your boys——"

" Save it."

The P.R. man swung a camera forward.

" Just look across that way, get a profile against those instruments——"

" Stow it ! Pipe down."

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Fluxmen didn't bother with a count-down. That was strictly for the deep-space boys. Flux-wagons just shuttled out into space, spread out from the base ship and then dived into the flux field. Like a posse of moles going to earth.

The jerk came. Somewhere a piece of loose metal started to bang against a bulkhead. The P.R. man was thrown across the automatic flight log and Bradley hauled him off it with more force than was strictly necessary.

Blasted civilians! As if I don't have troubles enough.

The speaker squawked. "Lash that loose raffle down."

"Wilco," came a response. Bradley hadn't sorted out the different voices yet except those of the negro, Washington, and the Arab, Bekr. He thought it was Mario. Certainly, it wasn't Larsen.

He wondered how the green hand was coming along.

They were in space now, but for all he could see they could be riding the underground monorail. He turned to chase the P.R. man out; but he'd gone, camera and all.

That was how most of the ninety-nine had begun, and it was typical of the fluxers. Quietly, unobtrusively, they slipped into space, ducked into the flux-field and began the eighteen hour run into the target area. Stahlheim. He wished he hadn't thought about it and went to check with the skipper.

The pilot's course board showed twenty-one small, brilliant chips of fire, scattered haphazardly around the central glow that simulated the M84. Rolling through the centre of the formation the red band of the proposed course unreeled like the centre line on an auto highway.

When that line stopped and the atmosphere came up, the results of Bradley's navigating through the flux field would show. He was used to that by this time. Six other lives besides his own depended on his skill—no, seven, this time, with that fumble-fingered photographer. The thought suddenly struck Bradley.

The photo man must be a very brave man indeed.

The second pilot did not turn as Bradley came through into the control section. Leonides was staring into his plot. The strong lines on his face were carved as though by acid. *A Death's head*, thought Bradley. *A fitting symbol for the leader of a coffin-load of nut cases.*

Nobody said anything.

Bradley cleared his throat.

"Nice takeoff, skipper," he began. "There's——"

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" Navigator Bradley," Leonides said, voice harsh and devoid of feeling. " You want something ? "

Oh, oh. One of the touchy sort. The bridge is his private temple, his sanctuary.

It was part of procedure on the old M43 for him to go forward immediately after takeoff and sort procedures out with Clark and have a yarn. Different wagons, different customs.

He said, stiffly: " Request permission to check flight log repeater."

Almost incredibly, and yet completely normally, Leonides said formally: " Permission granted."

Savagely, Bradley yanked the cover off the repeater, checked with his own master. I am the captain and my word is law aboard ! Sure ! A machine, trying to boss other men into machines. *That century suddenly looks good to me.*

Still the second pilot sat, silent, staring at his instruments. *The mummy in the case*, thought Bradley, and stifled what threatened to be a laugh born from hysteria and a continuous fight against the tensions that bound him.

The P.R. man came forward, requested and obtained permission to come on the bridge, and brought his camera up to angle its lens around like the snout of some prehistoric monster. He shot a couple of frames. His face was already losing colour. He'd be sick pretty soon, along with Larsen, the new boy. Then they'd be indoctrinated flux-riders.

Back in the engine room Abu Bekr would be crouching over his engines, watching with narrowed eyes the build-up and collapse of the field. Its pulse had to be contained within very narrow fluctuations, bringing the mass of the wagon from one end of the scale to the other.

The billions of neutrinos, that poured out from the interiors of stars and swarmed through all space, able to punch cleanly through fifty light-years of solid lead—if anyone could ever imagine such a concept—were in that man-made field caught and lost. It was like hitching your wagon to a star. Tying on, being flung, letting go; being in one space-time continuum for what amounted to a neutrino-wide slice away from an nfinitesimal instant, and, for an equal amount of time, being in some other dimension.

A rubber band of science, pulled and relaxed. Putting a complex flux-wagon behind a cloak of invisibility, shuttling through space, bloated and shrunken, instant after instant.

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And rubber bands have breaking points. Pray we don't find it and break it this trip.

Bradley left the bridge, ducked into his nav cubby and went through the routine motions of checking atmosphere. Good reasons why you always checked and double checked and kept on checking. One break-down in the flux-field was one break-down too many.

The hours drifted by. The P.R. man—Bradley didn't yet know his name and felt little inclination for the effort entailed in finding out—prowled. He shot frame after frame. The glossies back on Earth would have a fine feature story out of this. Daring adventurer rides the flux-field ! Our brave boys of the fluxers ! Showing the Octos tricks !

If he comes back alive.

Duke Washington crawled through into the cubby. He put a plastic cup of coffee on the chart table. The bombardier's dark face, although composed and unnaturally restful for a fluxer, radiated an inner conflict. You got sensitive to fluxer's feelings; am empathy born out of a shared fear stood like a live bridge providing common support and comradeship between all those who rode the flux-field.

Fear took men in different ways. Some contracted granulated eyelids. Others' skin coarsened. Most grew tense, and overcontrolled on simple muscular operations, so that always their bodies seemed to be vibrating at abnormal rates. Every movement was performed against the drag of weights attached directly to nerves and muscles.

Fluxers usually used up the superficial arsenal of fear symptoms early on—the sweats, the stomach cramps, the refusal of muscles to obey the will. Those who didn't, didn't live.

" Good coffee," Bradley said, warming his hands around the cup.

" Yeah. How long now till we reach their pickets ? "

Bradley didn't have to look at the flight log.

" Seventy minutes, give or take five."

The negro's face altered in the angled light reflections.

" What's this give or take business ? Johnny could always tell us to a second."

" What happened to him ? "

" He——" Washington's eyes flickered. He swallowed. " He cracked up, last trip."

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" Seventy minutes, give or take five," Bradley repeated. To soften the abruptness of that, he added: " I'll tell you to within a millisecond when we come out of flux and make our run and dive back again. That's important."

The seventy minutes fell into eternity after all the others. As the fluxers drew near the first shield of Octo watch stations, there seemed almost to be a static electrical charge of tension in the wagon. Without much imagination, Bradley could guess, the hairs on his head would rise and float. He finalised his computations and fed them through to the front office. This was the final mission—and it was going to be a good one.

On that thought, the whole fabric of the wagon shook.

He glanced at the chart, figures tumbling about in his head. The loose raffle started banging again.

" Stow that ! " Leonides shouted.

Bradley put his head into the pilot section. The board showed the flux-wagons spread out, boring in. Around them little sparkles of light flickered where the flux-field was being peppered by mines from Octo watch stations.

They knew the Earth men were there, all right.

It was like forking a pot of stew for the meat. If you used enough tines you'd strike lucky.

One of the twenty-one accompanying chips of light went out.

" Time check," Leonides said.

" Fifteen minutes ten seconds now," Bradley said.

" They're too damn close too damn early."

The wagon shook again.

We're the fish in the barrel.

Duke Washington crouched over his sighting equipment up forward like some jungle savage over the entrails of a goat — *or whatever they crouched over before disaster struck.*

Down below, in the swollen belly of the wagon, circuits would be coming back to life, ready to activate the bomb-doors. That whole section was purely automatic, sealed away from the personnel compartments. They might ride in through atmosphere thick enough to melt wings off unprotected fliers; it was thin enough for them to die almost immediately.

At fifty thousand feet I'd have just fifteen seconds to react before losing consciousness.

The P.R. man shouldered past Bradley into the nav cubby. His face was taut with sudden realisation of where he was. He dropped the camera.

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Bradley caught it. He pushed its strap over the man's head.

"Here. You'll need this. Some good shots when we traject atmosphere."

"Yeah. Yeah." The P.R. man fumbled the camera as though he'd seen it for the first time. "Thanks. Good shots —yeah, I'll do that." His eyes were blank.

The wagon shook and they both stumbled across the flight log.

"Those are mines?" He was talking for the sake of it.

"They ain't church bells," Bradley said shortly. "The Octos can't see us in the flux field; but they know we're around and coming in for Stahlheim. They shoot in like buckshot."

"How much longer?"

"Nine minutes."

Abu Bekr scrambled forward, riding the almost constant shuddering of the wagon. His Arab face was white.

"Rockets hit!" he shouted. He bundled past to the control section, pounded hard on Leonides' shoulder.

"Rockets hit! They'll never work when we traject!"

Bradley, pushing the P.R. man aside and staring over Bekr's shoulder, saw Leonides' body stiffen, saw his hands grip the wheel. Then the reaction of the silent second pilot wiped away other impressions.

The second pilot simply stood up, gazed blindly around with protruding, anisocoric eyes, then tumbled headlong down the hatch. His head hit the metal with a sound perfectly audible above the ever-present flood of noise from engines and equipment.

The wagon shuddered again. The second pilot rolled over and lay, arms outflung, staring dreadfully up at them.

"Get down there and fast," Leonides rapped.

Bradley jumped down the hatch, staggered as the wagon rolled under him, and checked the second pilot.

"Shock," he called up. "Right under," He dragged the man away and made him comfortable with a blanket in a cranny of equipment. Around him the metal walls were visibly quivering from the vibration effect from the mines. Working fast, he gave the pilot a dope shot, switched the blanket on, set the thermostat, and then swung quickly back to his nav cubby.

They were due for the run in.

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And no rockets. Have to squirt her, squeeze her out of flux and across the traject like a pip out of an orange. Lemon, more likely.

Leonides was shouting. Bradley poked his head into the front office.

" Get this madman out of here," Leonides was fighting with the P.R. man. Bradley leaned over, brought a handy wrench down behind the man's ear. He laid him out on the catwalk.

Bradley settled down behind his equipment. He made a quick decision. His fingers, steady and controlled, working through instinct and familiar neural patterns, manipulated the board. *I'll push this wagon across on hands and knees if I have to. Stahlheim, here we come* !

Which was all very hero-like, and completely wasted with the P.R. man lying unconscious. Bradley stirred him with his toe. He groaned, rolled over, then pushed up.

" Get that camera of yours ready, bud," Bradley said, quite unaware of any incongruity in the scene. " I'm taking her in coasting on the flux effusion. You're really living, this trip."

The P.R. man clutched the board, pulled himself up to stand by the nav cubby. His face mirrored a struggle going on within him. He mastered himself. Bradley felt a stab of admiration as the photo man said: " What happened to the rockets ? "

" Mine," Bradley said briefly. " Stand over by that port, you'll have a view."

" I'd never thought much about bringing men into this life before," the P.R. man went on. " Why don't they leave it to the machines ? "

Bradley started to laugh cynically, thought better of it in the realisation that it was a waste of time. *This guy doesn't even know I hit him over the head.*

" Machines for this sort of job are too old fashioned," Bradley said matter-of-factly, using only half his mind, concentrating with the active part on juggling the wagon. " You can build a torpedo or guided missile to home in on a target, so the Octos build an anti-torp torpedo. So you stick extra equipment on to deal with that, and they reply. Pretty soon you up the stakes to two missiles: one just fazzle-dazzle equipment to make sure the first one gets through."

" And ? "

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"And you end up with a wagon-load of equipment to put one itsy-bitsy bomb through. And even then you can't guarantee a hit——"

"But I thought a cobalt bomb would settle a planet——"

"Sure. But we want to live here, too, remember?" Bradley checked time. One minute. Talking was as good a way to clear his mind as any. "The Octos are broadcasting scramble stuff on the common Earth frequencies and we're replying." *How's young Larsen doing?* "We'll go in, drop our bombs with rocket assistance, and try to put them in so close and fast that no interference system can react fast enough. It usually works out all right—the bombs go through—but the wagons don't always come out the other end of their run. It's a case where theory is fine but practice is a little rugged."

"I thought the flux-field enabled you boys to come right in without being spotted?"

The wagon shook. The main lights blinked, went out, and then came back on emergencies. The air was hot and stinking, a flat sour smell of burning rubber drifted towards the ventilators.

Bradley said: "There's your answer to that."

Leonides said, his voice high and sharp: "M67 just went out. I'm moving up to take her place. Recast run, navigator."

"Oh, hell!" Bradley swore and his hands darted over the computer. The answers came up and were transformed to the front office board with fifteen seconds to go before breakthrough.

"Okay, skipper!" Bradley shouted. "You're on!"

This was where his navigation showed up. This was where they jumped into space. Right on the rim—this time, please! My century! Please!

He caught a lungful of smoke, gagged. The wagon leaped like a salmon going up-river. His grip on the board saved him. The P.R. man fell heavily against the port.

"I'm hit! I'm hit!" Someone was screaming from aft. The squawk box filled with noise.

The hiss of air mounted with blatant terror.

"Hold her steady!" That was Washington, up front.

Bradley's navigation job was done, now. He dropped through the hatch, cleared the ventral defensive weapons.

Abruptly, like flinging open a door from the night onto a surprise party, they were in real space. The sun flamed

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blindingly. Filters clicked down. Bradley blinked, and immediately the radar picked up opposition.

And, with the same alacrity lost it as scramblers erupted all over space.

He scanned what he could see, not trusting the wild alarms coming from all the equipment. Below a ventral fin, so vast that it covered everything, the brilliant green curve of Eight swept away on both sides. His vision did a flop-over and the whole mass of the planet was above him.

Long, slender, beautiful lances of flame arced up. Interceptors ! He swung the big plastic-grained screen round, tried to get the bubble sight aligned, with the wagon's artificial-grav field doing uncontrollable things. He strapped himself in. No time now to think about anything.

Bright bursts stained his retinas. Automatically, his fingers contracted on the triggers. The roaring hiss of escaping air deafened him. He caught a smashing glimpse of an explosion at the apex of one smooth streak of flame.

Fantastically, right before his eyes, he saw a flux-wagon turn over, half her stern gone, begin to go down.

Outside the air was thick enough now to create a constant sussuration, transmitted as a bone-tingling anguish through the fabric of the wagon. His ears ached. He saw the stricken wagon disappear somewhere below.

He didn't remember when the planet had gone round again, once more to appear beneath him. The horizon was flattening—there—it was bowl-shaped now. And the interceptors were pouring up. The Octos must have been ready for this one ! This mission was a real beaut.

The wagon shuddered. Someone—Mario—was cursing and shouting about patches. No time for that, now. They'd have to ride through empty—his job was to make sure no Octos stood in the way of Duke Washington and the little eye in his box of tricks. Someone was singing.

Bright drops of red spattered past him, splashed on the plastic screen. He reached up, wiped them off with his sleeve. The triggers went back again. More flashes of fire. More shouts and curses. The wagon bucked like a hot-footed bronc. The straps cut into his waist.

Machines ? Machines would be helpless, now, completely foxed by all the different signals flooding in. The air was full of

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stuff. He swung the guns, let fly, swung back. *When was Duke going to let the eggs go? Drop those bricks and let's get out of here!*

Up front, set in the top of the sight, those three needles would be swinging round to a conjunction. When they met Duke would activate the dropping mechanism. Even that couldn't be done automatically. Even with all the screening, all the careful protection—*you couldn't guarantee the Octos wouldn't sneak in a false signal.*

They'd love it if we dropped the bricks ten miles short.

The squawk box was going mad.

"I can't hold her much longer——"

"'Nother five seconds——"

"Holy Mary, Mother of——"

"Got that bastard—and you—you Octo . . ."

Where the hell are those bricks?

Bradley wiped away more red spots. They spurted oddly from somewhere over his shoulder. He turned to look up the tunnel at Duke, crouched over—and looked straight into the negro's face.

The face was upside down. It rolled as the wagon swayed. Bradley noticed that there was no body attached. The red spots were gurgling up from the neck.

He looked, fascinated, for what seemed a very long time.

All sounds appeared to dim and fade away into a background shingle of waves on shore. He couldn't move a muscle. It was as though he were enveloped in some binding fluid that both supported and chained his body.

Then, with a shock that penetrated shrillingly into the recesses of his being, he was aware of his body moving, entirely of its own volition, inching into an arc, knees drawing up, head going down and tucking in, arms bending and pressing close against his ribs like folded wings.

This mustn't happen! He mustn't allow it!

Like the release of a dam, like the spring of a bow, his repressed emotions surged out in an avalanche, an arrow of triumph. He shook until his teeth rattled in his head.

Tears streamed down his face. They scored marks in the muck greasing his cheeks. His whole body flapped.

And then he was scrambling, hands and knees knocking against the catwalk, flopping into the bombardier's position. He slid into the seat. He caught a quick glimpse of meters

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and dials dancing insanely. Noise erupted into the world again. Screams, curses prayers—he could see only the three needles sweeping into a single, threatening, demanding, imperiously compelling point.

He pressed the button.

Even as the bricks fell away he was shouting into his mike.

"Awa-ay—Get to hell outta here, skipper!"

With the release of the rocket bombs, the wagon had completed the work for which she had been designed. Oh, sure, it would be nice if they got back to base safely. Wagons and crew cost money. But that wasn't the over-riding consideration.

Bradley's muscles jumped, his face twitched—and he knew he was going through the build-up to being a good fluxer once again.

That's the trouble—they've got into the habit of regarding fluxers in the light of guided missiles. We're not just expendable—they're damn well surprised if we get back at all!

Beside him the headless body of Washington jigged from side to side with the upward surge and roll of the wagon. There was no chance now, after that session he'd had with himself back there, that he'd be sick: but Bradley didn't relish the position. Working with a quick fastidious precision, he placed the body in a plastic grab bag. He did it tenderly.

He checked the emergency patch that had slid across the hole. That, at least, could be entrusted to automation—make a hole in the hull and the exuding patch-system went into operation. Except, as now somewhere aft, the hole was too big. *Poor old Washington.*

If he didn't get the fluxer organised pretty soon, they'd all be following the negro wherever he'd gone.

Leonides was shunting the wagon across the rest of her traject. The wagon had skated into the atmosphere, her outside hull heating cherry red against the cooling systems, dropped her bricks, and was now squirting herself through for a break-out into space. Without rocket assistance, she had dropped to the rear of the others, was being selected as the logical target for the interceptors.

"Get down aft, Larsen," Leonides shouted. "Jump! You don't have time to be sick now!"

The Radio Officer stumbled towards the aft defensive positions. The squawk box rattled. Air was still hissing out.

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Mario was lying, groaning and writhing, and Abu Bekr calmly ignoring him, was slapping manual patches on as fast as he could go. The interior of the wagon was like a drum; with the crew as shaken peas, battered and blasted.

"The damned wagon's falling to pieces around us," Leonides' voice slammed from the squawk box. "But we're going to bring her home."

Bradley, crawling aft from the messy bombardment compartment, recognised the note in the captain's voice.

"You're right, skipper," he said.

He wants to show machinery that men can outlast it.

Bradley uncoupled the plastic grained screen and aligned the bubble. Almost at once he was shooting down Octo interceptors. He saw no guided missiles. *They'd be as much good in this man's fight as a bull-hide shield against a flame-throwing tank. Guided? That's a laugh. The scramble stuff bellowing out all over the frequencies would make them blow themselves up. And as for thermo-homing—too slow by a mile.*

Still, it sent a prickly feeling up his spine when he considered the fanatical feelings of Leonides. The man seemed, literally, to hate machinery. And here he was, perched in a metal womb, floating around in as hostile an environment as you could well imagine. If it wasn't for those machines, Leonides would be a smear of protoplasm.

Two sorts of machinery—like black and white magic?

Bradley pulled the bubble sight up, disposed of another interceptor. The sun's corona, visible over the bulge of the hull, enlarged. Vision was fining down. The stars were jabbing their fingers into his eyes.

"Hey! Skipper! We're in space!"

Without waiting for a reply, he scrambled up. Bekr flung himself down and took over the aft position. Bradley went bumbling up the catwalk, charged into the nav cubby and thrust his head into the front office.

Leonides was sitting, hunched up, his fingers curled round the wheel. The wagon shook. Not giving himself time to think, Bradley hauled on Leonides' arm.

Leonides jumped as though a vat of acid had fallen on his head.

"We're in space, skipper," Bradley said crisply. "Hit that flux-field, fast."

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Leonides palmed the red switches. The closing in of sense, the stuffiness in ears and nose; and they were in the flux-field. Bradley dropped a hand on Leonides' shoulder.

No need to discuss it. It happens to all of us.

Leonides was resuming control of himself. He issued crisp orders and presently the wagon resumed some semblance of order. The last, vainly and randomly strewn, mines shook them, making the emergency lighting blink in its sockets. And then they were free.

Bradley sat in his nav cubby. Wagon M84, riding the flux-field was baseward bound. He began writing up his log. The P.R. man looked in, shot a frame, then went away again. Bradley did not look up.

The squawk box grumbled.

"Navigator?"

"Here."

"Check on Rosenstein, will you? I think he's coming out of it."

Rosenstein? Oh—he must be the second pilot.

Bradley, putting away his instruments, rose and dropped through the hatch onto the catwalk. Aft, Bekr was attending to Mario. The Arab's face looked grim.

Bradley went over to Rosenstein. The man was moving his head weakly from side to side. Bradley checked the blanket, then gave him another shot.

Around him the flux-wagon was settling down to the run home; there was a conscious lessening of suspense and tension. Men reacted to stimuli in funny ways. Take Duke Washington, whose headless body lay in a grab bag up there, and whose head was somewhere unretrieved around the wagon. Washington. Calm and phlegmatic, keeping his emotions in hand by sheer deliberately contrived laziness. It was quite a trick.

And it hadn't been beaten.

Any piece of machinery stopped functioning with the control sections amputated. Rosenstein had simply blown a fuse. Abu Bekr? Well, the Arab must function on a different level, or he'd achieved a rare synthesis between fear and resignation that blinded him to reality.

Not that anyone ever faces up to reality one hundred percent.

And Leonides? And himself?

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Catharsis, the head-shrinkers would call it. The trained ability to eject unwelcome emotions through a brief indulgence —remembering it wasn't pretty—a sort of safety-valve, blowing off the fears that no amount of sane rationalisation could ever placate. In the special world of the fluxers, where they were in direct and continuous competition with automatic machinery, the tensions grew like a hysterical effect—every little twitch added a new grimace which ended up in a body-contorting lack of control. Then they flushed it all down the drain.

Bradley wondered what a machine would do. The answer was with Rosenstein and his reaction. Machines aren't adaptable—natural selection never has a chance to go to work on them, because machines never change unless a man decides upon it.

He remembered Larsen, the green Radioman, and went up towards the radio shack. The youngster had a shaky smile pebbling his pimples, was nonchalantly writing up his log.

"Real fluxer, now, Larsen," Bradley said.

"Sure." Larsen's smile faltered. "I was sure scared back there, though."

"Aren't we all," Bradley said. "But you're okay. You can adapt to conditions. Next mission out you'll wonder what all the fuss was about."

Next mission out! Hell's bells! My century! This is my last fluxer run!

He thought of Moira and Earth. Lightly, he punched the scarred metal bulkhead of the flux wagon.

A clean century. Well, what do you know!

Kenneth Bulmer

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There are more ways than one of killing a cat—or any alien creature for that matter. The method is immaterial ; it's the end result that matters, as Bertram Chandler suggests in the story which follows.

SISTER UNDER THE SKIN

By Bertram Chandler

Kennedy waited until the work of discharge was well under way, then went ashore. He could have left the ship earlier; he could, had he so wished it, have been the first to leave, but the other officers, his juniors, were all married, and he was not; not any longer. Still, he reflected, he was lucky to have a home to go to. He was lucky to have a sister of whom he was very fond. It would be utterly grim to come in from Deep Space—especially after a voyage to a drab world like Beta Sextans III, known to spacemen as the Slag Heap—to spend one's leave in a succession of hotel rooms. She was a good kid, Judith, he thought, even though she did have to go and marry that stuffed shirt of a Colonel.

The taxi was waiting for him at the foot of the gangway. Kennedy slung his bags into the passenger compartment, followed them. He gave the driver the address, sat back comfortably in his seat as the swirling vanes lifted him up and clear of the spaceport with its busy cranes and gantries and conveyor belts, the gleaming ships that looked like huge spinning tops scattered by some giant child among the complexities of a mobile construction fashioned from a stupendous Erector set.

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" A good voyage, Mister ? " asked the driver.

" No," said Kennedy. " Lousy. It's good to be back on Earth. I hope they send us somewhere better next trip."

" Where're you in from ? " asked the driver. " It looked like metal you were discharging. Slabs and ingots. . . "

" Beta Sextans III," replied Kennedy. " The Slag Heap. Three months from Earth even with the Ehrénhaft Drive running flat out, and when you get there it's nothing but a big ball of rubble where it rains for three hundred and ninety days out of the four hundred that make its year. There's no vegetation on the surface at all except for a few things like Terran lichens. There're fungi in the caves and tunnels—and that's where the natives live. Oh, they come out on fine days, I'm told . . . "

" What are they like ? " asked the driver. " I've heard tales about some of these extra-Terran women . . . I've often wished that I'd gone into Astronautics myself . . . "

" One trip to the Slag Heap would cure you of wishing," said Kennedy. " You've seen chimpanzees, haven't you ? Try to imagine albino chimpanzees that have a bath every six months, whether they need it or not. Oh, they're intelligent, up to a point. They work in the mines and the smelters, and get paid in gin and tobacco. All the overseeing is done by Earthmen, of course. Those poor devils are out on a three year contract."

" What do they *do* ? " asked the driver.

" What can they do ? They drink, they watch the films—and pretty ancient ones they are, too—that we bring out in our cargo, and they drink. Some of them, I've heard, have tried giving the native women—if you can call them that—a good wash and employing them as housekeepers, and there's been labour trouble in consequence, with floggings and shootings . . . "

" Sounds like a happy sort of planet," said the driver. " It wouldn't do for me. Come to think of it—when I pick you officers up at the spaceport you usually have bags and boxes full of souvenirs you've brought home with you. All *you* have is one grip and one suitcase. From what you've been telling me there aren't even any curios worth picking up on that world of yours."

" It's no world of mine, thank God," said Kennedy. " Oddly enough, I did strike something worth bringing home, though . . . "

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Gently, the taxi dropped down to the flat roof of the block in which Judith lived. Kennedy paid the driver, then carried his bags to the elevator. Seconds later he was walking along the passageway to his sister's suite. She opened the door as he approached it.

"Bill!" she cried, "it's good to see you back! Come in—your room's ready for you."

"It's good to see you again, Judith," he said, dropping his bags and hugging her. "It's good to have a home to come back to."

"It's good to have a big brother," she replied, leading him into the lounge.

"How's the Colonel?" he asked.

"I wish you wouldn't keep referring to Jim as the Colonel," she objected.

"But he is so a Colonel," insisted Kennedy. "You could never take him for anything else. I shall be quite surprised if you don't snap to attention when he comes in tonight . . ."

"He'll not be coming in tonight," said Judith. "He's got a tour of garrison duty on the Moon. As a matter of fact I should have gone there with him—but I insisted on being at home to welcome you in."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Kennedy.

"And why shouldn't I? You're my best big brother. Anyhow, I had to stay to see what you've brought me this time."

"Mercenary cat. I told you, before I left, what sort of a world Beta Sextans III is. Well—it is just that, and worse. A slag heap in a cold drizzle, crawling with butterfly-brained apes . . ."

"I'm going to sulk," she said.

"Will you pour me another beer?" he asked.

"*No.*"

"All right, all right—you've blackmailed me into it."

Kennedy got to his feet, opened his suitcase. He lifted out a civilian suit and then, carefully, a lustrous golden fur.

"But this is lovely!" cried Judith. She almost snatched it from him, held it against her cheek. "It's beautiful!"

"And it matches your hair," said Kennedy. "But look at it carefully. Look at the cunning way in which the animal was skinned . . ."

"Why spoil things?" asked his sister. "Women love fur—but they don't like to be reminded of the . . . preliminaries."

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" Even so," insisted the spaceman, " it's interesting. You've seen tiger skins and bear skins, of course, to say nothing of that birix pelt I brought home from Spica II . . . Are you still using it as a bedside rug, by the way ? "

" Yes. Well, as a matter of fact Jim got rather huffy when I refused to come to the Moon with him and said that he was going to have *some* home comforts, and took it with him."

" Trust the Colonel. Well—you can use this until he comes back. After that—have it made up. But we're wandering away from the point. The average pelt, as I said, has to be cut to remove it from the animal. *This*—well, it *may* have been cut, but I don't think so. It's just as though every morsel of flesh, every splinter of bone, was vaporised and blown out . . . "

" Never mind the details. What was the animal, anyhow ?"

" I can't remember the native name—and if I could I couldn't pronounce it. We call it O'Grady's Mole—O'Grady was one of the officers of the survey ship that made the first landing; he stumbled on a sort of colony of the things in one of the caves. As a matter of fact, they're supposed to be protected . . . "

" Won't you get into trouble for having this skin ? "

" I could, I suppose. But I didn't kill the mole myself, and there's no law to stop the natives from doing it—after all, it's their world. All that can happen is a new standing order to the effect that personnel will not, repeat not, buy furs, pelts or skins from the aborigines of Beta Cygni III . . . "

" How did you get it, then ? "

" Well, as I've told you, the Slag Heap is a grim world. You're far better off staying aboard the ship—but, sooner or later, you have to go ashore for a breather or start climbing up the wall paper. You go ashore for a breather—and what is there to do ? "

' Knowing you," she said, " I can guess."

" How right you are. (My glass is empty, by the way . . .) Well, there's a sort of village where the overseers and the clerical staff live. They have a couple of pubs. They're far from jolly places—you'd think that the boys in charge of the mines and the works would be pleased to see a few new faces and to hear a few fresh stories, but they're not. They're a sullen crowd and seem to resent us.

" Anyhow, this night in question, there were four of us from the ship at one end of the bar—the Old Man, the Second Pilot,

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the Doctor and myself—and a bunch of the locals at the other. Each party was keeping itself very much to itself. Suddenly there was a commotion at the door. We looked round. One of the natives was trying to force his way in, and two hairy-faced, hairy-chested overseers who looked just about as human as the native were trying to keep him out.

" Well, it was none of our business. If we lived in Africa we'd take a dim view of baboons forcing their presence upon us while we were enjoying a quiet beer. We were ignoring the whole affair when the native, who seemed to know some English, started shouting out, ' Spacemen ! Must see spacemen ! Must see Captain ! '

" This direct appeal to the Old Man had results.

" He said, in his best Control Room voice, ' Let him in '.

" ' He's not coming in here, Mister ', said the barman.

" The Old Man just *loves* being called *Mister*.

" ' My man,' he said, ' I would remind you that I, as Master of an interstellar ship, rank with, but not below, the Governor of a Third Grade Colony . . . '

" He was right, of course—and the bartender knew sufficient interstellar law to recognise it. He said, however, that he would send a report in to the Commission, and the Old Man said that there were many things that he could mention in *his* report, including miscegenation . . . And this threat brought results.

" So they let the native in. He looked pitiful standing there under the glaring lights—a huge, shambling brute with filthy matted white fur, almost human, but not quite; here, in this bar, an alien on his own world. In one big, gnarled hand he carried a limply hanging sack.

" I heard two of the overseers whispering together. ' Yes . . . That's him. Dangerous bastard—cause of all the trouble . . . " And—' You can hardly blame him . . . Slater shouldn't have taken *both* his women . . . ' Then—' Christ ! Are you a monkey lover the same as these bloody spacemen ? "

" The Old Man overheard this last. He said, ' We're not monkey lovers—but we believe in fair play.' To the native he said, ' What do you want ? '

" ' Captain, sir,'—I wish that I could put the accent across properly; it was like a dog talking in broad Glaswegian—' do trade.'

" ' All right. What's in the bag ? '

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" ' This, Captain sir.'

" And so he pulled out, one by one, five of the pelts. The locals were furious. Nobody offered *them* bargains like that. And they were bargains, too. Do you know how much I paid for this ? "

" No," said Judith. " But I can tell you that this pelt, on Earth, would take all of Jim's monthly pay, and yours too."

" I paid," Kennedy told her, " just one bottle of gin. That's all that any of us paid, except for the Old Man. He paid two —but he got two furs. Now—I suppose you're going to have it made up into a coat."

" Not yet, Bill. Not until Jim gets back from his tour of duty. I miss my bedside rug."

" As you please," he said. " It's your fur. And now, my dear sister, what about climbing into something glamorous and doing the rounds of the night spots with me ? "

" As *you* please, Bill. But I know you, and know that you'd sooner spend your first night at home *at home*. I've got a steak, and I'll do it the way you like, with lots of garlic. There's a bottle of Burgundy. There's a big hunk of that stinking English Stilton."

" You," he said, " are an angel. Remind me to get you a pair of wings next trip." She refilled his glass, he sipped appreciatively. " It's a funny thing—I've often heard you and the Colonel grumbling about this apartment, complaining that it has no windows, no natural light. That, to a spaceman, is a point in its favour. We see enough of the sky and the stars—when we get home we like to forget about 'em."

" All right," she said. " I'll try and keep things this way for you. And now I must retire to the kitchen."

" A pity there wasn't an animal inside the skin," he said. " I'd be hungry enough to eat it ! "

Three days later Kennedy was told that all the cargo had been discharged from his ship and that Lloyd's Surveyor would be making the routine inspection of the hull. A Survey was a job for the ship's own Chief Officer, and not for the spaceport relieving staff. Judith accompanied him up to the roof, where the taxi was waiting for him.

" Pity it's such a dull day," said Kennedy. " Weather Control must have slipped up. You won't be able to get in your sunbathing."

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"I'll manage," she said. "Anyhow—there's plenty to do about the house. Don't work too hard, Bill. Give me a ring when you're ready to come home. I'll have drinks ready for you."

"Thanks," he said. "Be good. I'll be seeing you."

He enjoyed the flight from the city to the spaceport. He looked down with pride at his gleaming ship as the helicopter drifted in to a landing. He climbed the ramp to the main airlock with a certain eagerness, whistled softly and happily as the elevator whisked him up to the Officers' flat. In his cabin he changed into protective clothing, then sat down to wait for the Surveyor and the Astronautical Superintendent.

The survey did not take long. No plates and no structural members were in need of renewal. Kennedy would have been free, then, but for the fact that it had been impossible during the forenoon—cabin stores were being loaded—to test the main air-lock doors.

So Kennedy lunched on board, his only companion at table being the elderly, grounded, ex-Chief Officer who undertook relieving duties aboard the ships in port. The old man was not a brilliant conversationalist, having little to say except grumbles about the easy life led by the modern spaceman in comparison with what he had to put up with when he was a youngster. Kennedy found this rather boring. After lunch—the survey of the airlock doors would not be for another hour or so—Kennedy retired to his cabin, lit his pipe and pulled from his bookcase the well-thumbed volume of Kipling's verse.

He was reading happily when there was a knock at his door.

"Come in!" he said, rather testily. He finished reading the verse before looking up to see who his caller was.

"... *The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady,*
Sisters under their skins ..."

"What did you do with your skin?" asked a voice.

Kennedy looked up, saw that it was the ship's Surgeon.

"What brings *you* back, Doc?" he asked. "Loading's not started yet."

"Never mind the loading, Bill. What did you do with your skin?"

"My *skin*? Oh, you mean those pelts we got at Port Debenham ... I took it home, of course. My sister has it now. What's the flap? Customs?"

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" No, Bill, it's worse. Your sister hasn't had the skin made up into a coat, I hope. I tell you—once those skins get out into sunlight they're dangerous ! "

" What is all this ? " asked Kennedy.

" I'll tell you. It so happens that Marilyn—my wife—is allergic to fur, even to extra-Terran fur. As soon as I unpacked the thing she started to sneeze. She said that she appreciated such a lovely present, but that I, as a medical man, should have known that, as far as she was concerned, it was quite impossible.

" Well, I'm well in with the boys at the Department of Extra-Terran Biology, and I thought that they, at least, would be glad of the pelt. The next morning I took it round to them. They were pleased to get it. The following morning they rang me, saying that it was urgent that I come round to see them at once.

" I'll cut a long story short, Bill. I'll skip the biology of it all. I'll just tell you in words of one syllable what happened at the Biology Lab. and what they found out in consequence. They are, as you know, a distrustful lot of beggars. They work on the assumption that the average spaceman is an incompetent bungler. They assumed that nobody aboard the ship had the savvy to sterilise the furs—and so, having first of all taken samples to be checked for micro-organisms, they proceeded with the sterilisation. They used all sorts of radiation for the job, including ultra violet. And it was when they were using the U.V. that the skin came to life—it tried to *eat* one of the lab. technicians ! "

" Impossible," said Kennedy.

" No, it's not impossible. Here's the way that they doped it out. O'Grady's Mole is, as near as dammit, immortal. When its body is worn out, it comes to the surface and . . . dies. Flesh and bone are either absorbed into the skin or blow away as dust. Sooner or later the empty skin will be found by one of the aborgines, and used as rough clothing of a sort. Sooner or later the aborgine will be wearing the skin, on the surface of the planet, on one of the rare fine days. What happens then is simple—there'll be one aborigine less and one O'Grady's Mole the more.

" Anyhow, the flap was on. We got all the skins back but yours. The Captain's wife was lucky—she laid both her furs out on the flat roof to air in the sunlight—when we got there

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she was in hysterics and two odd looking things, like three-quarter deflated balloons covered with golden fur, were flopping around the roof. They had once been Pekingese dogs . . . "

"I gave the skin to my sister," said Kennedy. "She's using it as a bedside rug for the time being. Luckily she lives in one of those inside, fully air-conditioned apartments. There's no danger."

"Even so," said the Doctor, "you'd better go to her straight away and get the skin back."

"I've got a Survey," said Kennedy.

"Damn your Survey. Can't you see, Bill, that those natives hate the guts of all Earthmen? Can't you see that the selling of the skins to us, the spacemen, was all part of a scheme to have revenge on Earth, on the planet that spawned the slavedrivers? There's no time to lose, I tell you!"

"Oh, all right," said Kennedy. "I'll tell you what I'll do. There's a phone on board—I'll ring Judith and tell her to lock the skin in a cupboard until we turn up to collect it."

He left the Surgeon seated in his cabin, went out to the wardroom to use the telephone. When he came back his face was pale.

He said, "She doesn't answer. But she's out shopping probably."

"We have to make sure," said the Surgeon.

"But the Survey . . . "

"*Damn* the Survey. They'll have to have it without you."

"All right," said Kennedy suddenly.

There was nobody in the flat—nobody human, that is.

There was a thing that shambled to meet them, walking clumsily on all fours, skidding on the polished floor.

Kennedy looked over the golden-furred back of the brute to the open bedroom door, saw the articles of clothing scattered on the bed, saw the overturned sun ray lamp still burning.

Bertram Chandler

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It could have been a television set, or a gravity nullifier, or a Time machine—or a combination of each. Whatever it was, the long dead Martians had left it for posterity—or any enquiring mind from another planet. The problem was to get it working, preferably under control.

MADE ON MARS

By E. R. James

Marius Hedley, Director of the Liffield Foundation's Second Archaeological Expedition to Mars, stepped up on to the jagged oblong of thick metal which had just been cut out and levered away from the newly excavated dome.

Behind him other members of the expedition, from workmen up to senior scientists, pressed inwards, but were careful to keep from jostling him as he stood within the raw edges of the opening.

All around the circumference of the floor, beneath girders bracing the roof, Marius's lamp showed piles of . . . . things. One does not think in clear terms of objects which are totally unfamiliar—but even in the faint, general radiance, these had the appearance of stores arranged in order by intelligent beings.

Marius focussed the light. The trembling of his hand showed in the way its circle of brilliance bobbed as it swung from right to left over metal boxes and drums and . . . metal and glass skeletons, from which time had crumbled into dusty ruin much of the softer parts.

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Several of his staff turned their heads to peer at each other through their dust goggles, and more than one pair of men touched respirators to make some low remark to each other.

The beam of light, halving the room, touched something in its centre. Marius leaned forward as he centred the light upon this something. A platform on legs two feet off the dull grey floor was circled by an uneven array of frames like those of chairs, over which fragments that might have been crumbled bone and clothing were draped, and below which the dust stood in silent piles.

No one spoke now. Here and there a man strained on tiptoe to better his view.

On the platform—it might have been a table—some strange apparatus—or the metal and other more durable parts of an apparatus, made an almost weird and certainly breath-taking sight.

During more than a minute, nobody moved. It was enough to consider the implications of this first complete, or as nearly as possible complete, evidence of intelligent life existing on Mars millenia ago.

Then Marius turned. He seemed to look at the closely bunched men as though he had forgotten their presence before he pointed with a thick finger to three men in turn and waved them inside.

They thrust eagerly free of their comrades, but stepped almost gingerly through the gap as Marius stood aside. There was no need to warn archaeologists of the need for care. They moved towards the low table as though they feared a sudden motion might cause a current in the thin atmosphere which would be enough to complete the destruction of some priceless relic.

Marius beckoned to a camera crew but his thick, outstretched arm barred their entry. "Take your pictures from here, outside."

His deep voice sounded strange, amplified as it was by a mechanism in his facepiece and differently pitched from normal by its passage through the thinner gases of Mars.

He nodded at a burly miner. "Post your guard, Lhaski. Remember that I'll be holding you responsible for keeping everyone out, except for those I authorise from time to time."

Without waiting for a reply, he peered around the remaining masked faces. "Engineer Drummond?"

"Sir?" A thick-set man flung up his arm.

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Marius gestured at the gap at his side. "I'll want a door on this, good enough to give an air-tight seal, so we can pump in breathable gases as soon as preliminary tests have been made."

The engineer touched the arm of the man beside him and together they moved forward to examine the weathered lead, bonded over the main dome of harder metal, and to measure the gap.

From watching them, Marius looked inside. A cine camera was whirring. In the brilliance of arc lights there were the footprints of men in the age old dust on the floor.

"*Man treads*
Across the challenge of the watching stars,
Nor heeds
His own nor other planet's locks and bars."

His murmuring voice cut off sharply as he swung around. "Tallon? Morley?"

Two arms were lifted.

Marius glared around. "Everyone else to your prearranged duties. I'll want to see senior scientists in my truck for a full conference five minutes from now."

As he set off along the lattice path laid up the slope of the excavation, the two men he had last addressed looked at each other and hurriedly followed him.

On the surface, they stepped over the pipes which had been used to suck away the dust, passed between the humming power trucks and were soon pulling off their respirators and goggles inside the Command Truck.

They and Marius looked at each other in silence.

Then Marius said: "Well you two, I'm not going to give you a dressing down for not being busy with your own jobs. For once I'm glad you took an interest. You saw that . . . gadget on the table in there. What did you make of it?"

"Something electrical——" began Michael Morley.

Christopher Tallon interrupted, freckled face frowning at his friend, "Electronic——"

"Electric and electronic!" Marius cut them both short just as they seemed about to argue. "That's just what I thought. And it puts me in a spot."

They stared at him, their young, fresh faces intent on his older, more sombre visage.

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Somehow he looked almost frightened. "Don't you understand what this means? I am an archaeologist. The contents of that dome are unutterably precious to me. If I so much as hint to Mars City or Earth that we've turned up some alien mechanism, we'll have technicians crawling all over the damned place. Whether they find out what that . . . thing did—or was, they will most certainly interfere with everything that I want to do. Who can tell what damage they will do in the dome? No, I'll not have them in my hair if I can help it." He put his hands on his desk and leaned forward. "Do you think you could analyse the function of that cursed thing?"

"Of course——" began Morley.

"We can try," corrected Tallon. "But don't blame us," he said cautiously, "if we fail."

"We won't fail!" Morley's dark eyes gleamed.

Marius smiled. "Thank you," he said. He arched an eyebrow at Tallon. "With your taste in reading, I thought you'd be the one to be sure of success."

"Science fiction," said Tallon, "helps to give one a picture of the difficulties confronting anyone faced with even the simplest of alien things."

A knock on the door interrupted Marius's answer to that, and nothing more was said as the scientists came in to find seats or to stand in the limited space around the desk.

Marius waited until all were present, then sat back and folded his arms. "Well gentlemen . . . when our aerial survey located metal beneath the dust in the spot, I don't think any of us dared to hope, at this stage in our experience, for a find like this."

Men moved with suppressed excitement, looked at each other and again at Marius.

He continued. "I intend to go over everything that has happened, so that we will all fully understand what is going on." He looked significantly at Morley and Tallon. "With a find of this magnitude, every detail must interlock with everything else. Pardon me therefore if I seem to stress the obvious." He pursed his lips. "First of all, we must remember that this is the *second* archaeological expedition on Mars. Men were on this planet for decades before it was even realised that there had been a civilised culture here before their own. And the first expedition which I had the

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honour to head was started on the flimsiest of evidence. A fragment here and an oddly shaped lump of metal there. Even so that expedition scarcely did more than establish beyond reasonable doubt that another civilisation did exist thousands —perhaps even millions of years ago on this planet. As an analogy, I might add here that back on Earth the tools of the Stone Age were not credited until so many specimens of oddly shaped flints had been collected that accidental manufacture could be ruled out.

" Here on Mars, we have never dealt with flints; our findings have been the remains of much more advanced artifacts. Yet, up to this very day, no complete evidence has been found. We are making history ! " He paused, the muscles of his heavy jaw working.

He continued more calmly. " Now, are we all quite convinced of the authenticity of this find of ours ? "

Heads nodded vehemently.

He held up his hand for silence to be maintained.

" We are, then, agreed that we have stumbled on something which existed before the first man walked the primeval face of Earth. So far so good. Petersen, tell us the first thing we did . . . after the dome was fully excavated and found to be welded completely shut and bonded to the bedrock."

A tall, lean man stood up. " Acting on your instructions I had a hole bored through to the inside. It was found that the pressure of gases inside the dome was slightly greater than outside. This proved to be enough to make sampling easy. The gas inside the dome was 95 per cent argon—and the residue a mixture of other gases which my chemical staff have not finished analysing but which are mainly, we think, the result of the decomposition of organic substances."

" We are not all chemists," said Marius. " Describe the properties of argon for us please."

" It is an inert gas——"

" Thank you. That will serve us, I think. An inert gas is one of a group of so-called noble gases which do not form chemical compounds—with the usual rare exceptions, of course. Now why should the dome be filled with such a gas ? "

" To preserve its contents ? " hazarded Tallon.

" Yes ! " Morley chuckled almost foolishly with nervous tension. " Those things in there have been pickled."

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" H'm ! " Marius frowned at the facetiousness. " Yes, that was my own thought . . . " He turned to a small old man sitting close to him. " What does our historian make of that?"

" It's hard to be definite—as Mr. Morley seems to think he can be." The old man wagged his head wisely. " But everyone here has heard of the theory that Mars was devastated by some incredibly violent war—its oceans split up into their original gases and most of those gases dissipated into space. As a tentative suggestion—only a suggestion I must stress—I might go so far as to say that, in view of the absence of other complete remains, this might have been a last refuge . . . "

" Preserved," put in Tallon, " for a possible future generation—or for other visitors like us."

" And that," said Marius heavily, " poses a question. I can put it in just one word. Why ? "

Nobody tried to answer him aloud and after a few moments' silence he stood up. " The conference will be resumed at mid-day tomorrow after everyone has had an opportunity of studying the samples which by this time ought to be coming from the archaeologists who were the first men inside."

As the others rose to leave, he caught Tallon's eye and motioned for the two young men to remain behind. Alone with them again, he rubbed his face and squared his shoulders. " Well, Messrs Morley and Tallon, what do you suggest as a beginning to your investigation ? "

" We'll have to go in there," said Morley.

Marius nodded. " Yes, I can see that. Tallon ? "

" Well, sir, from the glimpse I had, I'd say that the apparatus is likely to fall to bits at the slightest touch. I think we ought to do three things. First we must make a mock-up, using substitute, easily worked materials, so that we will have a master design in case of any accident. Second we must try to make a scale model of the real thing—using the same materials as the makers, or at any rate materials which seem likely to be of similar function, and having comparable properties. And lastly, you will have to order considerable quantities of the actual materials—or as near to the actual materials as analysis can make them—so that a full scale duplicate may be made. The scale model may not have the same properties as the original . . . "

" I shall have to do that very carefully," said Marius. He scratched his chin. " Very carefully." He looked up almost

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grimly. "You realise, of course, that I am hoping that you will prove that this apparatus is beyond our understanding?"

"Do you honestly think that is likely?" asked Tallon.

Slowly shaking his head, Marius said, "No. If I didn't have faith in you both, I wouldn't dare to entrust you with anything like this."

"You mean," said Tallon, "that, because we have taken the responsibility from you of solving this problem, we have more or less staked the rest of our careers on the outcome."

Marius looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Sometimes, Tallon, your bluntness is disconcerting. But of course the answer is yes. Does it make any difference?"

"None at all."

"Then you are confident of success?"

Morley's voice rang into the silence of Tallon's hesitation. "Sure thing. We'll crack it."

"We will do our best," said Tallon.

Marius scribbled a note. "This will authorise you to enter the dome at any time you wish. No one else will have such power, so . . . use it carefully, both of you." He glanced at Morley, as he held it out to Tallon.

When the two were outside, Morley halted Tallon and touched respirators. "Why did he say that about wanting the gadget to baffle us?"

"Because," said Tallon, "he wants to keep this project to himself. A gadget like that, if it turns out to be sensational, might make the archaeological side seem very insignificant . . ."

They went on in silence. It was second nature to them to move about with a kit of emergency tools, so that they had no call to make before entering the dome.

Until long after darkness had fallen, they were busy with the difficult task of examining the alien apparatus—not daring to touch it, but trying to make some sense of its parts—and in drawing diagrams and having photographs taken from all angles and trying to trace circuits.

Neither slept very much and both were up with the dawn, meeting as pre-arranged, passing on the responsibility for their own duties to others, and hurrying back to the dome.

A messenger came to remind them of the mid-day conference, and they arrived belatedly to meet the stares and veiled criticisms of men of greater standing then they had.

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Marius had evidently declined to listen to any reports until they were present. Now everyone was eager to say his piece, to add to the picture as a whole. And more than once Marius interrupted a man who was getting deeper than was necessary into the technicalities of his particular speciality.

Remarks made by the ecologist and the expedition's doctor —acting as biologist—were most interesting to the two men concerned with the problem within a problem. It was the ecologist's opinion that there had originally been more intelligent beings within the dome than were suggested by the remains on the chairs. He based this on the provision of supplies, and the work which had been done both in making the dome and the mysterious objects inside it. Of the remains which had been found, the doctor had the surprising information to give that most had broken bones and perhaps all of them had been bandaged.

Morley whispered to Tallon that this ought to mean something. And they both listened intently as patches of oxydised metal were stated to have been found in the dust around the dome. " Machines ? " whispered Morley.

Marius again signed to them to wait after the others left. He said: " You've made a bad impression and called attention to yourselves by keeping the conference waiting."

" I'm sorry," said Tallon. " I've been thinking about that. Hadn't you better assign one or two other men to making models and mock ups of the creatures everyone is talking about, and some of their other gadgets as well, so that we aren't too conspicuous ? "

Marius agreed readily to that. Tallon was thinking on the right lines, he said. And, without asking if they had made any progress, he let them go.

After that, apart from attending the daily conferences, they had little contact with him. During the afternoon they moved into a pre-fab hut which was assigned to them from those erected by the working party. Behind its locked doors, their mock-up grew with their increasing knowledge. They began to examine the apparatus itself by touch and made enough demands on the analysis section to bring a note from Marius telling them that he had had complaints from other members, and asking them no to monopolise the facilities which he had allowed them.

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Materials not always being what they seemed, they were continually having to alter the mock-up. Whatever it was they were working on, it was certainly of great complexity—and yet, as they came to realise, behind all its many electrical and electronic parts, there was a basic simplicity. " Something like a TV set . . . " said Tallon, when they were finally looking at what they thought was the final version of the mock-up.

Morley scratched his head. " Something like how a TV set would appear to a guy of Faraday's time . . . "

" Better get Marius to have a look at it," said Tallon. " He's not going to like the preliminary indents we are going to have to make on his stores just for our model. We've got to get him solidly behind us."

Something like an hour later Marius was glaring at the thing they had made on a bench at the side of the hut. " A monster," he said. " It may destroy us all."

" Oh, it's not a death ray, sir," smiled Morley.

Marius looked at him with some disapproval. " No . . . I did not suppose that it was. . . "

Tallon began to point out the credit which would reflect on the Director of the expedition if something of use to mankind was found amongst the dust of Mars's remote past, but Marius cut him short.

" What are you after, young man ? "

Tallon told him, the list of materials causing occasional interjections of which the most violent was " Gold ? Man, how do you think I'm going to get you gold wire ? " But in the end Marius nodded. " I'll O.K. everything you ask for, of course. But remember we do not have unlimited funds at our disposal, even though we are, fortunately, only at the start of what was to have been a long expedition."

He glared at Tallon. " And don't get any ideas about taking over this investigation. Keep me fully informed—even if I have no means of understanding what you say—confound it ! "

As the hut's door closed behind him, Tallon and Morley grinned at each other.

Two weeks later thay had the model finished and had brought other technicians into the work—in spite of Marius's objections—to duplicate the original apparatus in a larger hut which they took over, after argument and black looks, from a senior archaeologist.

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" Old dry-as-dust," said Morley, " will go green with envy when he finds out what we're using his beautiful hut for."

" I doubt it, Mike," said Tallon. " He's more likely to be just as resentful of our stealing his glory as is old Marius."

Marius came in just then. They had sent for him to witness the first switch-on.

He listened with a frown as Tallon began to explain.

" Well sir, you've got to realise two things. First we don't know for sure if we've done it right. So many things had just crumbled that something may burn out because we've underestimated current pressure——"

" Yes, yes. I know all that. You don't think I've been an archaeologist all my life without finding out such difficulties?"

" I suppose not, sir. The second thing is that we simply have no idea what it is supposed to do. It may be dangerous. There may be risk . . . "

Marius drew down his eyebrows but made no comment.

Tallon continued, " Because of that, we haven't put it all in one piece as in the original. We've connected it up so that we can switch on what seems to us to be its parts, each in turn."

" Get on with it, then," said Marius.

Tallon made adjustments to a control box and put over a switch, keeping his hand on the knob.

Something seemed to drag them with increasing force towards the apparatus. Tallon gasped as he felt himself moving. Marius let out a well-bred curse. Morley yelped. The switch clicked back over as Tallon was moved . . .

And they found themselves staggering. Tallon caught hold of the bench and Marius caught hold of him.

" It works ! " said Morley.

Tallon put his hand over his mouth.

Marius glared from one to the other. The silence grew longer until suddenly the phone shrilled. Marius went over to it, and came back frowning.

" Judging from that report, you've caused enough damage to set back archaeological study for days."

Tallon jumped to his feet. " But, sir. It——"

" I know ! " barked Marius. " It works. Not only did it affect us, but it has moved everything in this hut—the phone included. And everything in the camp area outside as well. All right. So now everyone will know that something strange is going on. You——"

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As the phone shrilled again, he looked over his shoulder, then back at the two experimenters before going to answer it. " You'll do nothing else, until I have warned everyone that this may happen again. *I shall have to stop everything else for this confounded thing.*"

He went over to speak soothing words into the phone, then, with a parting glare, left the hut.

Morley blinked. " Good thing you switched it off, Chris."

" I didn't," said Tallon soberly. " It was just luck. The switch went over because I'd still got my hand on it when I was moved."

" Anyway . . . " Morley chuckled as his natural exuberance took over. " It certainly shook all the odd bods we've got around us. Matter over mind—— Chris ! " He caught Tallon's shoulders and shook him vigorously. " Chris ! It's an artificial gravity machine ! "

" Steady on ! " Tallon freed himself. " You're going too fast. What you ought to say is that the part we've tested is an artificial gravity machine . . . "

" Eh ? Of course. Yes . . . What is the whole thing, then ? "

They looked at each other and at the apparatus spread in its parts over the bench.

When at length Marius came back he had two of his top archaeologists with him. It was plain from the strained atmosphere between them, that they had forced themselves upon him—and that they had done so, not so much out of interest in what was going on, but because they felt that their seniority entitled them to be there.

Marius said stiffly: " Since I left you, Tallon, I've been thinking that if we are to continue with this thing at all, we must not risk a repetition of what's just happened. Your idea of testing each part has been proved dangerous. It is the whole thing, or nothing."

" It ought to be nothing ! " interposed one of the archaeologists, an elderly man—who had already been moved from his large and comfortable hut because of the work on the full-scale copy. Tallon held his breath, and looked at Marius whose tone just before had suggested that he favoured calling in assistance rather than continuing on their own.

Marius glanced at the archaeologist. For a moment it was obvious that they were two ruffled males looking at each other,

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quarrelling over a bone that neither really wanted. Then Marius smiled.

"Couple it all up, Tallon. Switch it on."

"Yessir!" Tallon's fingers trembled as he made adjustments. He checked them carefully. Then he took a grip on the master switch and looked nervously at the apparatus as he flung it.

Everyone held their breath. Several parts of the apparatus began to glow faintly. On a blank plate of asymmetric crystal which the experimenters had obtained, after the usual protests, from amongst the stores in the dome, an irregular pattern of lights appeared and shone steadily.

Nothing else happening, Marius broke the silence.

"Perhaps you haven't done the fabrication correctly after all."

Tallon did not answer. He was frowning at the crystal plate.

The elderly archaeologist actually snorted disgust. "We're wasting our time here, Gruenther!"

His companion nodded agreement and they went marching out.

Marius watched them go, then looked intently at Tallon. "I can't help it. You've got me interested now. What do you make of it?"

"Well," muttered Tallon, thinking aloud as much to himself as to his companions, "we know that this section has an effect like that of gravity. Now in the original, this part here——" he pointed, "——and this similar part on the other side, are close up to the gravity-simulating coils. They must, I think, somehow counteract the gravitational effect. See the bolts which fasten the parts to the bench. They are actually straining, aren't they? If . . . you have two forces fighting each other, what do you get?"

"Stress?" suggested Morley.

Tallon nodded without looking around. "Stress on the level of gravity. What might that do?"

"What do you think?" asked Marius.

Tallon turned slowly. "I think it might have an effect on space itself. It might warp space . . ." He paused as though expecting Marius to scoff.

But Marius was only looking at the steady sparks of light upon the plate. "They're moving. Very slowly—but they're moving."

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Morley and Tallon leaned excitedly forward, but presently turned to Marius.

"Are you sure they're moving?" asked Morley. "I can't see any movement at all."

"There was one right on the edge of that plate. I saw it wink out . . ."

Tallon picked up a slide rule and put one end of it against the face of the crystal. "It feels smooth . . . almost greasy." He took the contact lead of a voltmeter and touched the crystal with it and put the other lead against the metal of the bench. The needle stayed put against zero.

Morley put a finger against the crystal before Tallon could stop him. "It does feel greasy," he said. "It feels sort of rubbery . . ." He stared at his finger end which was slowly sinking into the dark, pin-point lighted screen.

Tallon turned from it to look at Morley's astonished face. Suddenly he seized Morley's shoulder and dragged the man back.

And Morley screamed.

Blood was spurting from his finger end—from where his finger tip had been.

"My God!" said Marius. Tallon ran for the first aid kit. Returning with it, he saw that the blood was now seeping more slowly from the foreshortened finger. Morley looked foolish and pale as he sat on a chair with Marius's arm around him. "I'm all right," he was protesting. "It was just the shock, that's all."

As Tallon was making a rough bandage job, Marius shivered. "Do you feel a difference in the air?"

"In the air?" Tallon sniffed experimentally, then put his head on one side. "I think you're right. It's colder than it was. I think perhaps . . ." He looked at the enigmatic apparatus and then ran to where a pressure gauge hung beside the air conditioner. He turned with startled face. "Our air's draining off through that screen!" He ran to switch off the power and all three shivered as they listened to the increased whine of the air conditioner making up the deficiency as fast as it could.

Marius stood up and went to the phone. He asked for Mars City and was presently telling them everything that he and his staff had done with an alien machine. When he turned back, he said: "I had to do that. You understand how big

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this thing is, don't you ? I'm sorry it will be taken out of your hands. Now you are in charge only until others get here. You've not much time . . . but it would be exciting if you could put the pieces together and say for sure what this is before anyone gets here. They sounded incredulous, then excited. A jet will do the flight in an hour or so . . . "

Tallon rubbed his face. " On the other side of that plate there was a vacuum just now. The vacuum of space. What more is there to find out ? "

" You're blinded to the facts by details," Marius reproved him. " That's a common enough fault with archaeologists too. Think man ! I'm sure I saw that star go off the screen."

" But we aren't certain it was a star . . ." protested Tallon.

Marius put his hands on his hips. " Call yourself a science-fictioneer ! Pshaw ! You've got me convinced. Accept the evidence yourself. And tell me why a star should move off the screen there."

" I can't think . . . " muttered Tallon miserably. "Unless . . ." He brightened. " But of course ! The Earth—I mean *Mars* is moving through space, and we're on Mars, so we must be moving with it, and that screen—or rather the other side of it must be moving too, at its fixed distance away from us."

" That's right ! " Marius almost shouted. " Now you're getting somewhere. What else can you deduce ? "

Tallon reached out and flung the master switch quite recklessly. He pointed to a section of the apparatus which largely consisted of gear wheels. " I wondered what that was for. Now I know. It can be adjusted to compensate for the complicated movements of Mars around the Sun, superimposed on that of the Sun around the hub of our Galaxy of stars—like this." He touched a dial which had been calibrated on the original in the dome, and the points of light took on a slow, weaving movement upon the screen. " It'll need practice to understand properly."

He bit his lip, then pointed to another dial. " That has something of the same effect, but varies the potential of the current through the whole warper." As he turned it, the screen flickered with light and the stars leapt at them.

He scratched his head. " There must be an aiming device somewhere, but I can't imagine it yet . . . "

" You will," said Marius. " I knew all along that you and Morley would solve this problem between you. Ah well . . . "

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He sighed deeply. " It's sad to think that mankind in general are a materialistic lot. They'll think so very much more of this contraption than they will of the undoubtedly wonderful people who destroyed themselves, or were destroyed aeons ago, but managed to make an escape route, and even to leave it for . . . us to find."

His shoulders sagging, he seemed very much older to the two young men than they had ever thought him before.

His bowed head jerked. He exclaimed incoherently. Bending, he picked up something, and expression of horror contorted his face.

Morley stood up.

Tallon took a pace nearer to Marius. " What . . . ? " He stared with rising gorge at the fragment on Marius's palm. It looked like a small piece of human flesh . . . perhaps half of a ball.

Blood ozzed from the open side. Marius turned it over gingerly with a shaking finger. It settled so that they saw a rim of pale, horny material attached to it.

" That's the tip of my finger ! " breathed Morley.

Tallon swallowed. " But how . . . ? " He put a hand over his mouth.

Marius looked at him. " Can you explain that in any way?"

Tallon shook his head.

They looked at each other in silence. But presently Marius stiffened. " I'm afraid I dare not allow you to make any further experiments without official supervision," he said. " You'd better write out a report of what you've found out so far to give to whoever comes to take over."

Scientists are much the same as other people. Some good ones never want to dissipate their energies by trying to control their fellows; others, however, may be bad scientists and yet use good researchers to gain power—and be willing to go to any lengths to keep it.

Tickburn, who came to the excavation site from Mars City, listened with veiled, supercilious eyes to the two young men's enthusiastic description of what they had achieved. He took Tallon's report, folded it neatly and put it in an inner pocket as though burying it there for all time. And, during the next few days, he gradually elbowed both of them out of the limelight.

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They found themselves back in their old routine jobs without realising quite what had happened.

But the next time they tried to enter the big hut in which the warper was being duplicated on a full scale, their alienation came home with a punch. "Sorry, boys," said the burly sentry. "No admittance except to those engaged on the project. Tickburn's orders."

They protested to Marius, who promised to do what he could but did not sound hopeful. "It's really out of my hands, I'm afraid," he told them sympathetically. "I've heard of this Tickburn. He's stepped on people before, but he gets things done—and that counts with the authorities. I'll complain to them as strongly as I can, but you see how it is, don't you?"

"Well," Tallon said bitterly, "I hope he knows he's playing with fire, that's all."

Back in their quarters, he looked at Morley and Morley looked at him. Tickburn had taken over every diagram and photograph they had made. "Do you think," said Tallon, "that we could make the plan of the warper from memory?"

"Sure thing!" said Morley, face brightening. He leaned across the little room from his seat upon a bunk. "Got any ideas?"

"Not exactly. Only a queer feeling we've missed something that ought to have hit us like a revelation. I . . . I've been thinking, and I can't for the life of me think how that warper could be aimed."

"Let's work it out, then." Morley reached for paper and pencil. "It'd give me a kick if we could steal a march on that double-crossing cuss, Tickburn!"

Just after one o'clock that night, they were staring at what each agreed was an accurate diagrammatic representation of the strange machine. Tallon caught himself nodding, stood up and began to undress. "Maybe it'll seem clearer in the morning . . ."

At four o'clock, he put on the light. "Mike! Are you asleep?"

A mumble answered him.

"Mike!" He slid out of bed and shook his friend awake. "Now listen. Assume that machine is a warper, then that means it bends space into a loop so that two points which normally are far apart are close together. That is to say, in our experiment, a part of Space a great distance from us was

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brought to the other side of that sheet of crystal. Normally that part of Space would only be visible to us by means of light rays and other radiations which travel at a known speed. A warper would seem to have instantaneous transmission—that is, it would have to break what we think of as the fastest possible speed—that of light. I wonder if, in doing so, besides straining Space, it might also have to strain Time. What do you think?"

"I think we ought to get some sleep——" began Morley.

But Tallon, wide-eyed with excitement, did not seem to hear. "How else did your finger end come back to us intact? If it was exposed to the vacuum of Space, it would be burst to shreds . . ."

Morley blinked. "You think that, when you made the stars seem to leap at us, you warped time so that my finger end came back through the screen—or the screen go through the finger end before it had been shredded by the vacuum . . ." He shook his head as though by doing so he could clear it. "Chris! You know, I think you're right."

Tallon stepped backwards to perch on the edge of his bunk. He was breathing very quickly. Sweat was beading out from his forehead. "If I am right—and I can see no other explanation—then, it means that there is no aiming device. That screen can only be moved back through time—that is, since you cannot have space and time separately, it must move along the path taken through space by Mars. It never actually leaves the surface of Mars at all, *but moves backwards through time and space, within the atmosphere of this planet.*"

Morley gaped a moment. "Then, in effect, it is not a warper at all—but a time machine?"

"No, don't you see? It is both. You cannot have one without the other. If I was to move into yesterday without moving in space, I would leave this planet and find myself in empty space where it would be today."

"You're right." Morley came out from under his bedclothes. He reached for his clothes. "This will shake Tickburn." Pulling on his trousers, he suddenly halted with one leg in the air. "But what about our air draining off through that screen when we experimented?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." Tallon frowned a moment. "Got it! Mars is smaller than Earth and thus would hold a thinner atmosphere all during its history. But

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the air in that hut was at Earthly pressure. Some of it would naturally escape."

"That's true enough." Morley pulled up his trousers.

Wearing facemasks, they hurried through the Martian night towards Marius's hut. There seemed to be an unusually large amount of activity going on beneath the stars and single hurtling moon at such an early hour. Several men passed them. The airlock of Marius's truck stood open and they could get no answer to their banging on it.

Tallon shrugged at Morley and pointed in the direction of the big hut in which the duplicate machine was being made.

As they turned, they saw that the unwonted early morning activity was at its greatest not around that particular hut but around the Dome itself. Lights swung and glowed in the excavation and the shapes of men moved purposefully.

They looked significantly at each other and began to run down the slope. A man coming up called to them. "That you, Tallon?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

Tallon's senses seemed unnaturally sharpened. In spite of the man's voice being muffled by a respirator and quickened with excitement, he heard the words plainly enough. "They've got the original machine working, Tallon. Marius is hopping mad because Tickburn's doing it all on his own. He sent me for you."

"We were looking for him——"

"He's over there by the original opening."

They sprinted, panting into their respirators, towards a knot of figures. One of these turned and, in the increasing light, Tallon recognised Marius's characteristic movements when angry.

"Tallon! Morley! I knew nothing about this until just now. Tickburn has secretly been restoring the original machine ever since he came here."

"The original machine!" Tallon swung around and leaped towards the Dome. His path barred by two burly men, he pulled up short. Coming back, he grabbed Marius's shoulders. "Get me in there, sir. We think we know what it is the Martians made."

Marius gestured at the guards. "Let him pass. I'll take responsibility."

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"No! Nobody goes in. My orders are clear." The guard's masked face tilted and his muffled voice took on curiosity. "I know enough to understand if you were to tell me what you think it is."

Tallon looked from him to Marius.

Marius shrugged. "You see how it is. You'd better tell him, Tallon."

"All right." Tallon took a deep breath. "It's a time machine—to the Martians it is anyway; but if you use the original one in there, it may be something else . . . as far as we are concerned."

Tallon, in his agitation, lifted his fists. "A time machine would have limitations. You could *not* use it to move into a future which had not been made. You could *only* go back into the past. But if you went into the past, you would affect the future *which was your own present*—if you stayed there.

"Therefore I believe that, from our point of view, it must be a *trap*. The Martians used the machine to go back into Mars's past. Thousands or millions of years seem *to us* to have elapsed since then. But I think that, if we use this actual machine as its makers undoubtedly meant us to use it, then the time which they are in their past will seem to them no longer than a single instant."

Tallon spoke with the measured slowness of an explanation which must be understood. "The machine itself will have been moving on through space and time in the normal way. Yet I believe that Tickburn has only to adjust it so that its screen moves back over the intervening years . . . and he will scoop the Martians back through the screen *just as we brought back Mike's finger end.* That finger end was still bleeding. So it is obvious, I think, that the Martians will come back to Mars in just the same attitude of mind as they left it. As the end products of a terrible and devastating war, they will immediately attack——"

A large section of the side of the Dome seemed to dissolve in a mass of orange flame, which roared outwards towards them. Crackling tongues of it died within feet of where they stood. Concussion smote them staggering. Debris splattered around them, bits hitting them, but shock had numbed faculties, making them unaware of minor wounds.

Air passed over them, a brief puff of wind. A confusion of dreadful cries came with it out of the Dome and dissipated with it into the thinner, unbreathable atmosphere of Mars.

Then all was deathly still.

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Because of the microphone in Marius's respirator, everyone heard his long indrawn breath. He thrust between the scattered guards and began to approach the smoking Dome, his arms outstretched on either side to keep the others behind him.

In the raw edges of the gap torn by the fire, he stopped. A radiance coming from inside silhouetted his bulk.

From the screen of the machine before him a shaft of light blazed down on a steep slant. The faint general radiance was caused by a proportion of this being reflected off the grey floor. "Sunlight from the past," muttered Tallon.

The crowd around him behind Marius moved uneasily. Through eddies of smoke and fumes, a litter of bodies made two separate shadowy groups between the observers and the time machine. The nearer group was composed of human bodies, mangled by blast and charred by fire.

"Poor devils," said Marius. "I wouldn't have wished such an end even on him."

Inhuman bodies in the more distant group writhed and made choking noises. Their strange, small arms tore at some kind of armour which encased them from head to feet . . . And one by one they ceased to move . . .

None of the onlookers made any attempt to give these dying creatures of another world and another age the oxygen they so obviously needed.

"If I'd acted more firmly," said Marius, "those little monsters might not have got here at all."

Tallon swallowed hard. "It was destiny perhaps. *They* had it all worked out for an unsuspecting someone to bring them back when Mars had recovered from the war they waged . . . but they forgot one thing . . ."

He touched the respirator on his face. "As a result of that war perhaps, and in this more distant time from their own, Mars no longer has an atmosphere they can breathe."

E. R. James

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The International Geophysical Year has opened with a magnificent display by the Sun with solar prominences greater than ever before recorded. We shall be dealing with the Solar Atmosphere next month, but this month Kenneth Johns' article discusses the known facts about our upper atmosphere which is materially affected by the Sun's activity.

POWER IN THE SKY

By Kenneth Johns

The results of recent colourful rocket research suggest that one day we shall see freight and passenger rockets arcing across the sky a hundred miles high and deriving their power from the tenuous yet energy-laden atmosphere.

Over sixty miles above the Earth's surface, ultraviolet light and X-rays from the Sun are absorbed by air molecules which split to create active atoms in clearly defined levels.

The first hint that there is a vast field of latent energy in the the sky came when astronomers discovered a persistent green radiation fogging their plates. This was first called the permanent aurora but is now known as the airglow.

During the day, this eternal glow in the atmosphere is obscured by the harsh glare of sunlight scattered by the air; only at twilight can it be seen clearly. As the Sun dips eight to ten degrees below the horizon a faint flash appears across the sky as sunlight cuts across the air sixty miles high. Made up principally of red and yellow light, the twilight glow is similar to the dayglow we cannot see.

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But we can detect the nightglow, even though it is a hundred times less bright than the twilight glow. Long exposure photographs clearly showed it; nowadays very sensitive photo-electric photometers enable astronomers to plot its density across the sky and its variation during the night hours. Colour filters are used in the equipment to separate the different spectral lines from one another, each colour representing different energy reactions in the air.

The nightglow appears to be more intense near the horizon where a greater thickness of atmosphere is in line with sight; this is an allied phenomenon as the reddening of the sun's rays when seen low on the horizon. The nightglow is mainly limited to between sixty and a hundred and twenty miles high. The green part of its light decreases after midnight whilst the red part decreases soon after sunset and brightens just before sunrise.

These brilliances of colours are not just haphazard strokes of nature's brush; each is caused by some known reaction. Oxygen accounts for the green and red colours. An oxygen molecule split by ultraviolet light gives excited atoms so much energy that they radiate green light and drop to a lower energy state. Even then they are still so excited that they must give off more energy, which appears as red light within 110 seconds. But, to explain the queer decrease in the intensity of the red glow long before the decline of the green, physicists believe the oxygen atoms are often de-energised by collision with other molecules before they can radiate into the red.

Astronomers see the sum total of light from any segment of the sky. To understand fully the reactions of these particular sections under study, and calculate the available energy, they had to know the density of the excited atoms at each level. The only way to do this was to cause all the oxygen atoms in a particular cross-section of the sky to emit their light at once. Luckily, the means and the mechanism were available.

Nitric oxide gas and sodium vapour will react with atomic oxygen; the nitric oxide to give a white glow and sodium to give its typical yellow. The problem of how to get the nitric oxide and sodium up there was solved by shooting it up in rockets. So far, all was theory; if the physicists were right, the reaction in the sky should follow their predictions.

And so, one night in March, 1956, a probing rocket from the New Mexico desert climbed skywards carrying a load of

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nitric oxide. At a height of 62 miles the valve was dynamited off the pressurised cylinder and the nitric oxide freed into the upper air. It expanded violently in the near vacuum. And a spreading white glow told the watching physicists that their experiment was successful.

More, later calculations showed that each pound of nitric oxide had released four horsepower of energy according to U.S. figures.

Then, on November 1st, 1956, another rocket in this colourful parade raced skywards leaving a trail of sodium vapour from a point 30 miles high upwards. At a height of 42 miles the typical yellow light appeared, increasing in intensity for the next 15 miles. From 57 to 60 miles the glow decreased and then disappeared. Whilst the glow lasted only ten seconds at the lower level, it remained for one and a half minutes in the excited, oxygen-rich higher levels between 48 and 57 miles.

Man, for the first time, had mapped the lodes of active oxygen in the atmosphere of his planet.

The use of sodium as an oxygen indicator is not original—it was suggested by Dr. Bates in 1950, and there has been talk of incorporating a sodium flare in one of the artificial satellites of Project Vanguard. And, there always is a little sodium in the air, about one in a million million atoms high up, accounting for the yellow portion of the spectrum of the airglow which can be distinguished during the twilight glow.

These experiments showed that the airglow is a sky emission produced by excitation of rarified gases until they emit light in much the same way as a neon lamp operates. The oxygen had been mapped, what of the nitrogen? An earlier rocket experiment had proved the presence of analagous active nitrogen atoms. The nitrogen molecule is far more stable than the oxygen molecule so it would be expected to require more vicious radiation—that found higher above the surface—to split it up. Active nitrogen atoms had already been detected at a height of 500 miles in the aurora borealis and it was thought that there would be few below 60 miles, the lowest level of the aurora.

The rocket used for the experiments, the Aerobee, had a maximum payload of 350 pounds; its structural strength imposes this limit. It was also found that a minimum payload was necessary for stable flight, and this was 120 pounds. The rocket was 20 feet long and weighed less than a ton and

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was fired from a launching tower. This was the rocket used to carry up the mice that featured so prominently in the free-fall pictures showing our first space creatures from Earth. Maximum speed was 3,500 miles an hour and the maximum height 100.6 miles.

Clearly, then, the physicists could not probe the highest portions of the stmosphere where they might expect to find active nitrogen atoms. Later, the Aerobee was replaced by the more powerful Aerobee-hi.

An Aerobee rocket, loaded with two lightweight cylinders fabricated from glass fibre was chosen as the vehicle; ethylene gas was the detector. It had already been proved in the laboratory that ethylene will react with active nitrogen atoms to give both blue and red light.

The rocket climbed away. The first time-controlled dynamite charge blew the valve off at a height of 60 miles. The rocket continued to climb whilst an engineer waited with his finger on a button—the second valve charge had been fitted with a radio-controlled fuse as a precaution. But it blew to schedule as the rocket reacned its maximum height, 90 miles. A faint glow in the sky as the first charge blew proved the scientists right.

A cloud expanding to a diameter of two and a half miles, although only equivalent to a fourth magnitude star, was analysed by spectrometers and colour sensitive films and the scientists went home rejoicing.

So far, attempts to detect the airglow during the daytime by sending up instrument-loaded rockets have failed.

But most of the airglow is in the infrared, due to the hydroxyl, the OH group. It is believed to be formed by the interaction of ozone and hydrogen to give hydroxyl and oxygen. If anyone had the power of infrared vision, the glow would make the night sky a misty, faintly luminous bowl, extending from horizon to horizon and raising the total light well above the threshold of an infrared seer's vision.

There is energy going to waste in the skies high above our planet. A colourful marker has already been set on the path to harnessing that power for the use of rockets traversing the thin reaches of the upper atmosphere.

With the probable use of one of the Project Vanguard satellites for this research, it can truthfully be said that the rocket is hard on the search for its own sources of power.

Kenneth Johns

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Different worlds are more than likely to have differing forms of intelligence. Whatever the variations, they are certain to resent Man's intrusion, especially if he insists upon inflicting his own way of life upon them. There are numerous methods of retaliation.

THE WATCHER ON SARGAN IV.

By Peter Hawkins

The wind moaned dismally around the guy ropes holding down the tiny scoutship, the sand it carried scoring the ship's hull with a cross-hatch of tiny scars. As the noise of the wind rose slightly Frank Henderson intoned the solemn words of the burial service a little louder, although there was no necessity for his extra effort. Derek de Voile was his only audience and the radio in his atmosphere suit was quite indifferent to the howling sandstorm which almost perpetually enveloped Sargan IV.

For a few moments after finishing Henderson stared emptily at the slight mound of stones beneath which lay Alexander Patterson's body. He'd never liked Patterson; nobody had, but although that was a facet of life, it hadn't

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made killing him any easier. After all he was—had been—a comrade in arms, a fellow Scout and one of Exploration Command's finest solo operators. Henderson's conscience worried him considerably over Patterson's death but he consoled himself with the thought that a man could live only by having the courage of his convictions, and it was Henderson's firmest conviction that if Alexander Patterson wanted to keep him on Sargan IV for the rest of his life then there was something about the planet which Exploration Command should know.

The fact that the something on Sargan IV had made Patterson responsible for his attempt to destroy their scoutship, as he had his own and maroon them worried Henderson too, but again he consoled himself with the thought that he was doing what appeared to be his duty. He only hoped time would dim the memory of his action and future events prove him right.

"Let's get back, shall we?" asked de Voile's soft voice in Henderson's earphones. He nodded, snapped shut the plastic folder in which the burial service was printed and trudged back to his ship, de Voile silent a few steps behind, his mind paraphrasing afresh the briefing he'd been given before leaving Terra.

"The *Starlight Endeavour* reported, after landing on Sargan IV that it was a barren planet, forever enduring a duststorm to a greater or lesser degree. That it had an ionosphere no signal could penetrate and that the intelligent inhabitants, such as they were, were of human stock as are all the intelligent races in the universe, underlining once more the fact that once, long ago, humanity was star-travelling race which lost its knowledge and degenerated to barbarism through an unknown cause. In their brief survey the expedition found no artifacts of any description other than those made by the present natives. They uncovered only one legend, that of a green-coloured mist which the natives said occasionally visited them and advised them on their main problem—that of staying alive on their most inhospitable world.

"After fifty years, finance and galactic exploration being what they are, a solo scoutship manned by that rather cranky and highly moral Scotsman, Alexander Patterson, was despatched to take a second look at the place. Nobody worried about him not turning up for eighteen months because he's erratic and because Sargan IV is a miserable world for humans anyway. A certain Trader Gorringe dropped in with

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a usual selection of trading goods to see what disadvantage he could do the natives and became curious when he discovered Patterson's ship destroyed in the approved Exploration Command style. After the poorest of trading, bad from two causes, the natives were too busy keeping alive even to carve stone and they refused to deal with him because the cloud of green mist, called by them Ghensar, forbade them—he left and eventually reported his findings to Exploration Command. With so many better worlds needing Scout's attention Sargan IV and Patterson would have been ignored for several years had it not been for Gorringe's report." As he scrambled into the tiny cabin of the scoutship and ripped off his facemask Henderson grunted aloud,

"Our problem—sort it out."

De Voile, following him, asked:

"You mean—this mess?"

"Of course!" snapped Henderson. "What other mess is there?"

De Voile stripped off his atmosphere suit and said, "I'll fetch some coffee; we'll both feel better for it."

Henderson grunted ill-humouredly and crossed to stare through a port at Alexander Patterson's rudimentary grave, visible and invisible by turns as the wind-borne sand billowed and eddied across his field of vision. De Voile thrust a beaker of steaming coffee into Henderson's hands.

"If you weren't a doctor I'd prescribe a sleep pill," he suggested.

"Perhaps I'll have one," admitted Henderson. The shock of taking a life was wearing off slightly, although the sick and empty feeling which followed a death persisted in the base of his stomach. As a doctor he was no stranger to death; more than once a patient had died beneath his fingers and for a while, until time had permitted him to adjust to the situation, he felt perturbed and a little lost. The sensation was worse and longer lasting this time; hitherto he had been on the side of the patient, grimly fighting away the last, terrible adventure for a person who had placed all his trust in him. Now he had been directly responsible for sending someone on that last great journey which everyone must make alone. Moodily he sipped his coffee, unaware that it scalded his tongue and throat on its downward passage, half seeing Patterson's lonely, humble grave and imagining the howling of the wind beyond the warm, safe cabin of the scoutship.

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He glanced around as a slight rumble disturbed his ruminations. He opened his mouth to call de Voile and then saw his partner staring out of the opposite port. De Voile turned to face him, the noise stopping and then starting again.

"That's someone pounding on the fin. First native we'll have seen." He hesitated, adding, "Unfortunate if he wants to know where Patterson is."

De Voile clambered lithely on to the ladder through the ship's hollow backbone. Henderson followed, glad of a diversion which took his mind away from his unfortunately good shooting but which promised to place him in a position worse than he had been with only Patterson's death on his conscience.

By the time he reached the bottom of the ladder de Voile was already unfastening the door. A few seconds later it opened violently, torn from de Voile's hands by a tremendous gust of sand-laden wind. De Voile switched from manual to power, cursing his lack of forethought.

Henderson peered out, sheltering his eyes with his hands, the sand biting into his exposed flesh and the wind chilling his body through thin coveralls. A thickly-clothed figure clambered up the ladder on the fin and jumped inside, throwing back his furred hood to reveal a face burned by the elements to dark brown and eyes slitted against the sand and wind. Otherwise his features were pleasant and as he extended his hand he spoke in fair Galactia.

"My name is Boronay. I have come to see Alexander Patterson who said he intended visiting you. Have you seen him?"

Henderson stood clasping Boronay's hand for several seconds before he replied.

"Come up the ladder and have some coffee."

As Henderson followed Boronay up the ladder he found time to place his whirling thoughts in order. First of all he rationalised the use of Galactia; Patterson had been on Sargan IV some eighteen months and had taught it to at least one native. Patterson had also told the natives there was little to fear from Earthmen and had warned them about the strange things that Earthmen used. Now, of course, Boronay would want Patterson. He waved Boronay to a chair and poured coffee for each of them.

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Boronay refused saying simply, " Ghensar prefers us not to take your drinks."

Henderson hesitated before pressing the coffee on Boronay, deciding that a man knew his own mind. He put the beaker on the control desk and said, " If you care to drink it, of course you may."

He paused before continuing; Ghensar was the green mist mentioned by both the *Starlight Endeavour* and Gorringe and it was obviously a very real being to Boronay. Henderson took a couple of sips of his coffee.

" Can you tell me about Ghensar ? " he asked.

" Alexander Patterson didn't tell you, then ? He said he would."

" I'm afraid he didn't," admitted Henderson. He and Patterson had never spoken; with de Voile he had been returning from a preliminary reconnaissance when they'd seen Patterson clambering from their ship trailing a piece of wire. His intention was obvious; one pull on the wire would wreck the vessel, permanently marooning Henderson and de Voile on the planet. There had been only one answer—and to trust that when Patterson fell there was sufficient slack in the wire not to trip the switch. Luck had been against Patterson.

" He can tell you better than I," said Boronay, " but where is he ? "

Henderson rose from his stool and walked a couple of steps backwards to the steel bulkhead.

" I'm afraid Alexander Patterson is dead."

Boronay looked puzzled, not perturbed or angry, sorrowful or curious.

" I'm sorry, I don't understand. ' Dead ' is a word in Galactia which I don't know."

Henderson felt his thoughts whirling. Here was the perfect opportunity to conceal Patterson's fate from the inhabitants or—his thoughts halted, the notion destroyed by the realisation that perhaps mention of death was taboo in polite conversation on Sargan IV.

" He's gone on a long journey," Henderson murmured evasively.

" I understand. He said that if more Earthmen came here he might have to leave us. I must go now and tell Ghensar." Boronay rose to his feet and extended his hand. Surprised and bewildered that his euphemistic explanation had been accepted Henderson shook hands with him and followed

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him down the ladder to the door. De Voile was sweeping up the sand and cursed again as Henderson re-opened it, this time with the power controls. The howling wind reduced de Voile's tidiness to nothing before the door closed on Boronay's thickly-clothed body.

Leaving de Voile sweeping up afresh Henderson returned to the control room. Moodily he finished his coffee and then started on the beaker he had poured for Boronay. He wandered to the port and stood waiting grimly for the sand to part to give him a view of Patterson's grave. Eventually the wind dropped for a few seconds, laying the sand to reveal Boronay crouched beside the grave, methodically removing the stones of the cairn.

Henderson carefully lowered his coffee beaker and clenched his hands tightly on the control desk. Suddenly the curtains of wind-blown sand closed in again, obscuring Boronay from his sight. Henderson unclenched his hands and called,

" Derek ! "

De Voile's footsteps echoed up the ship's backbone by way of an answer. In a few moments Henderson felt de Voile beside him. Without turning, or taking his eyes from the sand-obscured grave he said :

" Boronay's found it."

" Now what ? " demanded de Voile. Obviously he had decided that it would be only a short while before a man used to the conditions of Sargan IV would find the grave.

" Nothing we can do. Press on with the ground survey, make what observations we can while flying and then orbit to pick up anything else, which'll merely confirm what the *Starlight Endeavour* reported. If we make contact with the natives well and good but if they remain shy we can't help it." Henderson rubbed the glassite port in an angry gesture and added, " I'll take that sleeping pill."

The sleeping pill gave him eight hours undisturbed sleep but it neither salved his conscience nor solved his problems. Patterson's death still clouded his thinking and precluded his making sharp decisions and actions. While he puttered about his routine tasks, taking more than his usual time over them, de Voile romped through his propulsion and communication maintenance in record time. Together they prepared for another expedition on to Sargan IV and, after a good meal, set out to cover an area of ground and a straight ten-mile hike against the wind.

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By the time they'd been away from the ship half an hour de Voile muttered through his throat mike: " If this sand was gold they'd never colonise the planet."

" I know. We've got to do the tests though," Henderson replied. Adding after a pause, " If possible."

De Voile muttered agreement and plugged steadily away against the wind and sand. Henderson kept close check on their course, eyes hardly straying from the tiny navigator built into the sleeve of his atmosphere suit.

" We'll never do ten miles in this," persisted de Voile.

Henderson mentally agreed, summing up the planet as totally unfit for human occupation. The natives, the representatives of the star-travelling race which had fathered humanity, were welcome to their world; they needed nothing the new civilisation of Earth could give them and their world seemed to have nothing of use to Earthmen which the latest methods of detection could discover. The natives of Sargan IV could keep their perpetual sand-blast of a world. Henderson shook his head grimly, trying to imagine putting down a class-800 vessel amid the constantly fluctuating wind eddies. It couldn't be done; therefore all supply and maintenance for a colony would have to come in tenders from an orbiting space-station. That meant more expense, trouble, personnel and in turn, more maintenance and supplies. De Voile's lugubrious remark had been nearer the truth than he had imagined; even if the dust of the planet were gold, it would hardly be worth maintaining a station to collect it.

Suddenly the wind increased in force, the noise rising from a low keening which once accepted was hardly noticed, to a frightening, nerve-tearing shriek. Instantly the airborne sand grains responded to the swiftly moving airmass, lashing through the tiny gaps between goggles and face coverings. De Voile gasped and swore violently.

Henderson cursed bitterly and said, " Down, until it's gone by."

He huddled himself into an uncomfortable crouch, back to the wind, welcoming the pressure of de Voile's body against his side. " I'll be more than glad to leave this planet," he said.

" Me too," said de Voile. " We've been together for ten trips and not one's been as bad as this." He chuckled. " There'll be nothing to go wrong; we turn in a lousy report on a worse planet and then we go on—out and have some fun."

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De Voile's voice flattened oddly on his last words. Once he got back to base he'd never leave it until his next trip as a Scout. Henderson knew de Voile had committed wilful murder and had joined the Scouts to escape his just punishment, the Scouts ensuring he would never fall into the hands of the waiting law by conditioning his mind against wandering outside Base. Base had everything any man could want; cafes and bars, bright lights and cabarets, together with every other relaxation and amusement Man had managed to develop in the course of history.

Henderson knew he, personally, would leave Base in search of pleasure; oddly enough his tastes were roughly the same as de Voile's. After a trip in space, usually on a dangerous or inhospitable world, the majority of Scouts sought out the same combined pastime of wine, women and song. They reasoned, logically enough theirs was a dangerous game and you played it young so you could have middle age and old age in which to spend the money your youth had bought. When you had leave, spend that leave as if it were to be your last. Henderson hadn't thought he'd turn out quite that way. Medicine had been a clarion call to him; the usual medical students' thoroughly enjoyable horseplay had passed him by while he studied and a progression of brilliant near successes, but without a final, resounding, clearcut success, had honed away the edge of dedication he had found in the Hippocratic oath.

Then, suddenly, another clarion call had sounded; deep space, the unknown. Well, he thought cynically, he'd obeyed the call, as he'd obeyed major and minor clarion calls throughout his life. He'd go all out for something, and then suddenly, one day, discover the whole thing was ashes in the mouth, just experience, interesting if viewed in a detached way but otherwise useless. One by one the various passions of his life flitted through his mind like pale ghosts, doctor and Scout the last two of a long list.

Now there was another clarion call; the final one. It was to go home to the green hills of earth and say ' to the devil ' with distant stars. Roving was never worthwhile, only coming home. Now, he thought, he could settle comfortably on Earth, buy a practice in a small community and become part of it, sit on the porch in the late evening and look up at the stars, like silver dust on velvet, draw on his pipe and think of the old days which, because they were the old days, were

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good days. In the daytime he'd be the doctor, a respected member of that community, ready with a helping hand . . .

"Hey!" De Voile's elbow prodded him in the ribs. "Wind's dropped. Let's get back to the ship, shall we?"

The return from daydream to reality was a resounding shock which shook Henderson to the backbone. He thought he knew homesickness, yet, argued a logical fragment of his mind, how could he sicken for something which he had never possessed?

"Feeling all right?" asked de Voile anxiously. "You look a bit . . ."

"I'm a little depressed. This is a miserable world . . ."

As de Voile helped him to his feet Henderson gave a shrug and left his sentence unfinished to indicate that Sargan IV was responsible for his malaise. How could you tell even a stabilised murderer that you were homesick? Home to his kind was Base; Henderson felt a moment of sorrow for de Voile, swiftly suppressed when he recalled how little sorrow de Voile had felt for his victim. Together they trudged back towards their vessel, Henderson's mind a swirl of rose-coloured plans.

Suddenly Henderson realised de Voile was no longer with him. His daydreams vanished, the sand bit and scored his skin and the wind howled and moaned anew in his ears. He glanced at his wrist compass and saw he was a little off course, although nothing to cause worry.

"De Voile!" he whispered softly, in an attempt to prove to himself that he was quite unafraid.

There was no answer above the hiss, rustle and crackle in his headphone. He called de Voile's name several more times, anxiety increasing with each call that yielded no reply. Without further hesitation Henderson smartened his pace, stepping out towards the scoutship as fast as he could. He had his duty to perform; in the prevailing weather conditions he could give no help other than to be on hand when, and if, de Voile managed to return to the ship. Probably nothing had happened except a fault in de Voile's radio and it was more than likely he was no more than ten yards away from Henderson but completely obscured by the blinding sand.

Urgency drove Henderson forward rapidly; in far less time than the outward journey had taken he was back inside the ship, fretting at minor pieces of maintenance and considering

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the wording of his report on Sargan IV, a little concerned about a report in which he would have to admit killing one fellow Scout and abandoning another. He moved over to the port to look for Patterson's grave, slightly relieved when the ever-changing patterns of the sand concealed it from his sight.

He brewed some coffee and waited, refusing himself sleeping tablets or sedatives in case all his skill should be required by an injured de Voile. He tried preparing his report and abandoned it in favour of reading. That failed to hold his attention and he spent several interminable hours brewing himself coffee and alternately nibbling at a succession of small jobs. Nowhere was there anything on which he could work seriously and at the back of his mind was one ominous question. How long could he give de Voile ?

Suddenly the question was answered for him. A rhythmic thum-thump-thumpity-thump echoed up through the ship's hull, the personal code knock each had used since their first trip. Henderson gave a shout of pure joy and almost slid down the ladder in the ship's backbone, his dreams of the distant Earth once again foremost in his mind. Eagerly he activated the swing lock and helped de Voile aboard. Almost automatically he set the airlock to close and swung round to greet de Voile.

De Voile had changed, subtly but unmistakably. He was no longer Derek de Voile, a good engineer phychoed for committing murder, but a man in full possession of all the facts of his life and one who'd looked them in the face, disliked what he'd seen and triumphantly survived the agony of the ordeal. Further, there was new purpose in his movements; he was a man who had seen a course of action and had decided to take it with all the power and force at his disposal. As he hung up his atmosphere suit he said quietly,

" I know I committed a murder. I'm going to repay my debt as far as is possible." He began clambering up to the control room.

" You have repaid," urged Henderson, following close behind him.

" I've repaid the way society wants me to repay, by becoming an educated monkey. I wish to repay all I can, my way."

De Voile broke open two cans of coffee as Henderson hauled himself into the control room. Before seating himself de Voile handed one of them to Henderson.

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" I'm not coming back to Earth with you. I know what's waiting for me there, once they discover their mental surgery's come unstuck." He sipped his coffee meditatively, while Henderson waited patiently, aware that de Voile was the prime force at the moment.

" While we were separated I met Ghensar," stated de Voile. He looked earnestly at Henderson before sipping his coffee again. " He removed the blocks in my mind about the murder I committed. I understand all about it in a way quite incomprehensible to any other person and in a similar way I want to repay. You follow me ? "

As Henderson nodded an affirmative de Voile drained his coffee. He continued,

" This is a miserable world, isn't it ? Dust-storms perpetually, little water, hardly enough time for the natives to do anything but live, nothing for a Trader like Gorringe, nothing for Earthmen like us who want to mine the guts from a planet, blend our way of life with that of the inhabitants and sell them the goods they don't want made from the materials they've dragged from their planet. Sometimes they learn too fast and overtake us. Then, despite the fact that all men are brothers, members of the same race, we as the present leaders step in and give them a sharp economic or military lesson which teaches them who's boss."

Henderson waited, holding himself in check. De Voile had confused himself a little and after draining his coffee leaned back in his seat and stared at the port through which Patterson's grave could be seen.

" Got a little mixed up there, didn't I ? " asked de Voile.

" Slightly," admitted Henderson.

" This planet's no good to anybody, is it ? "

" There are some humanoid inhabitants and there's green mist called Ghensar," reminded Henderson.

" Yes, quite true." De Voile paused for several seconds. " Listen—Ghensar told me to pass on to you this information."

" Why didn't he come along and see me himself ? "

" When you've heard this you won't want to ask questions; you'll just want to sit back and think. Now—first and most important Ghensar is immortal . . ." De Voile raised his hand as Henderson opened his mouth to query the statement. In response to the gesture Henderson dammed the flood of questions which inundated his mind and forced his attention

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to de Voile's words. " He's the sole survivor of a civilisation which grew up contemporary with an earlier humanoid civilisation. Throughout the worlds we've explored we've found traces of our own earlier civilisation but none of any other races so we've tended to regard humanity's downfall from its previous high estate as pure chance, a disease, a temporary radiation from a nova or any of a dozen unlikely happenings. It was no unlikely happening; it was man's usual failing—war, war with Ghensar's people. They were few in number; we were many. One by one we were killing them off for the sole simple reason we could find no common basis on which to communicate. We couldn't understand them, so we destroyed them.

" They had civilisation, a kind of civilisation we clever mechanics can't understand. It's a culture which has no artifacts, needs none and deals solely in abstract ideas. As a culture it revered life and abhorred death, for as it was the individual was immortal, unless destroyed by some physical means, the race's regenerative cycle was geared to it's death cycle and birth of any young was an unlikely event.

" That was until we with our ephemeral life-span came upon the scene. We, with our clever use of Nature's laws, exploiting of Nature, a brawling, lusty race without respect or reverence. Is it any wonder that we were considered as little more than a disease from the lofty viewpoint of Ghensar's people ? They retreated before us, reluctant to kill because of their own respect for life of any kind, however short its duration. Without eventual all-out attack on them they retaliated with a similar weapon. The effect was like dropping two pebbles into a pool; the shock waves met and resonated against each other up and down the galaxy. For a while there was chaos and in time, because communications were utterly disrupted, humanity sank back into a dark age from which it is now emerging to repeat the previous pattern.

" Ghensar was in a far worse position than humanity. During and after the resonating chaos which filled the galaxy he sought others of his kind, eventually realising that he alone of an immortal race was the survivor. It took him a long while to decide on his course of action but eventually he came across Sargan IV, a backward world, hardly visited by the humanoids, its few inhabitants having only brief, distorted legends of the galactic disaster. Here he made his decision. He was personally immortal; ephemeral humanity, an utterly different type of life, could never pursue his kind of existence. So,

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given humanity and given himself he has tried through the intervening years of blend our ideas and culture with his own. Sometime in the past, the people of Sargan IV have become immortal, so it would seem that such a prize comes with mental attitude rather than physical aids.

" He still has a long way to travel in his work with the natives here. He needed assistance and Patterson, highly moral, was the kind of man he needed to assist with his work. You killed Patterson, by chance, and I equally by chance, was the one of us Ghensar sought out to tell his story." De Voile paused. " Ghensar said he would like you to come in with him too."

Henderson shook his head.

" This story you've told me, if true, constitutes a menace to the way of life I know . . ."

" Don't be stupid ! " interrupted de Voile angrily. " The less Ghensar has to do with humanity the better he'll like it. He's trying to help . . ."

" Man can't be helped or educated. You know that better than I ! " flared Henderson.

" So does Ghensar, but he is trying to help, not closing the door on every chance."

Henderson nodded, the personal future he had envisaged out in the dust-storm only a few hours ago very vivid in his mind.

" I understand and appreciate Ghensar's point of view but I should like to point out that you and I are not permitted to make judgements. We only report. We are leaving Sargan IV immediately for Earth." Henderson rose to his feet. De Voile matched his action and said softly,

" I'm staying."

" You're coming back to Base . . ."

" No. For several reasons. My psycho is broken down and I know that means more treatment. Your report—what do you think Exploration Command will think of it ? Truth, or the words of a man trying to conceal some failure . . ."

" There is considerable evidence in my favour from two other sources . . ."

" I agree. Tell the Lord High Admiral at Exploration Command about a breath of immortal green mist on a dust-ridden world and see what he says. At most he'll send along a four-man ship in the next couple of years because he's neither the crews nor the equipment to do better. We'll know

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you're coming and keep well out of sight. No further evidence so—sorry, Henderson, back to your psycho treatment." De Voile chuckled. "Tell me doctor, what happens when a man is treated for a delusion he hasn't got?"

Henderson had been waiting for a moment in which de Voile was off guard and this seemed to be the time. He sprang forward, throwing all his weight at de Voile. De Voile sidestepped and allowed Henderson to collide with the stool on which he'd been sitting. Methodically he chopped a rabbit punch on the back of Henderson's neck, a blow which sent Henderson spinning into unconsciousness.

When he recovered, only minutes later, de Voile had vanished into the swirling sandstorm of Sargan IV with no indication whatsoever of which direction he had taken. He returned to the control room, bitterly ruminating over de Voile's words. How much notice *would* the Lord High Admiral take of a story in which an immortal—breath—de Voile had called it, of green mist figured prominently. Henderson's prize piece of evidence, a de-psychoed de Voile, would remain on Sargan IV. Ghensar, immortal, would keep his new humans out of sight for many years now, having had Patterson, Gorringe and now de Voile and himself for observation within a very short time. With all the far better worlds available for colonial expansion the file on Sargan IV would be dusted off from time to time by successive planners, the planet's poor quality and reputation re-considered before the file was replaced in its position in the archives.

There was an easy solution. Go back to Base; report de Voile lost in a sandstorm and no sign of Patterson. Hand in an unenthusiastic report, easily compiled considering the material evidence and recommend that no further action be taken. That was the perfect solution except for one thing. Henderson knew his limitations and loyalty was one of them. He'd signed up to gather knowledge for Exploration Command and he'd have to report it. If he turned in a false report he would be unable to enjoy the practice he intended to purchase among the green hills of Earth and, sooner or later, he'd find himself compelled to report the existence of a menace to the safety of the way of life he had contracted to defend, no matter what the consequence to himself.

Alternatively he could turn in a report correct to the last detail and wait patiently, as de Voile had suggested, until his fellow medics had finished treating him for a delusion he didn't

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have. After thinking around the problem for a while he began to understand why Patterson had taken the story of Ghensar so much to his heart. His peculiar idealistic nature would see in the situation a chance to make some repayment for the catastrophe his remote star-travelling ancestors had inflicted on Ghensar's people.

De Voile, of course, didn't want to be psychoed again. Henderson shook his head, disagreeing with his assessment of de Voile's motives as being selfish. He didn't think they were; de Voile, like Patterson, wanted to repay for that other, earlier tragedy.

Suddenly Henderson's thoughts snapped off. He rose from his stool and stared out of the port at Patterson's grave. He compared himself with de Voile. Both of them had cut down a man in cold blood, a man unable to defend himself. He, Henderson, had committed murder by not thinking. He could easily have waited until Patterson had left the danger area of the ship . . . No, he couldn't; once out of the danger area Patterson, his intention stated by the thin wire trailing into the ship, would have destroyed the motor.

Henderson turned away from the port, freezing into immobility. Across the dials, tuners and switches of the useless communicator hung a thin, green mist which hardly discoloured the dull grey finish. Henderson remembered de Voile's radio going dead; now he, too, was due to receive Ghensar's lecture? It would have no effect, he told himself. He'd return to Earth; he'd damn his conscience and submit a faked report, buy that practice and sit out on the porch in the evening and look up at the stars, like a silver dust thrown against night's black velvet sky. He hoped he wouldn't see a green mist stretching across the stars, destroying them for humanity and recalling that he could have prevented it.

"Henderson." The sound of the voice was like the rustle of autumn leaves. He knew beyond doubt the communicator was working, because its speaker stressed sibilants. The set wasn't tuned to de Voile's frequency and Sargan IV's ionosphere prevented any incoming or outgoing messages. He recalled de Voile's radio had failed and although de Voile hadn't mentioned how Ghensar had communicated with him, Henderson now deduced it was by using some of the radio circuits. He looked at the communicator, feeling a little foolish as he answered, quite coolly,

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"Yes?"

"You know the barest facts about why I'm here, Henderson and what I intend to try and do. I know your intentions, too. You are torn between two courses of action. Shall you report the facts you know or shall you conceal them? Your own personal desires in the matter are fading and you are enduring a struggle, one which only you can resolve. You will have to ask yourself whether the new kind of humanoids I create menace your civilisation. I can answer that for you—they won't. Then you ask yourself will my humanoids destroy your civilisation. I assure you that if they think it prudent to reduce humanity to the chaotic state which existed when all my people were annihilated they will do so, but only as a last resort and I should be most incredibly upset if it happened."

Ghensar paused, allowing Henderson a few seconds to wonder at the quiet, incredible courage Ghensar managed to project through the communicator. In his mind's eye he saw Ghensar roaming the entire cosmos, century after century, millenium after millenium, desperately seeking and never finding one more of his kind. He imagined the long, dreary procession of eternity drifting past the breath of green mist, while it surveyed the shrivelled remnants of a civilisation which had crumbled to dust and yet which would rise again after more millenia to march the same road of destruction across the stars its predecessor had trodden. He could imagine that after a long, long while that bitterness had subsided to hopelessness in Ghensar but that Ghensar had triumphed over both emotions and had tried, from the ruins of both civilisations to pick their best and start afresh.

The difficult question was—how sincere was Ghensar? Was it merely biding time seeking vengeance, or was it genuine in the desire to make a wonderful race from humanity! Henderson buried his face in his hands, feeling that in his decision of what to do lay a choice as great as that which had lain before Adam when he was given the choice of picking fruit from either the Tree of Life or the Tree of Knowledge.

"Henderson—Alexander Patterson helped me and now I have de Voile. I would like you, too." Again Ghensar paused. "Eternity is long time, Henderson, a terribly, terribly long time. Would I work a million years to build up something for the pleasure of destroying it?"

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For minutes Henderson sat in his chair, head in his hands, thoughts reeling under the impact of Ghensar's words. Finally he looked up at the communicator, a little surprised to see that the green mist had gone. From now on he was alone, free to make his decision and as Ghensar had suggested, his own private desires were now as nothing, less than one of the tiny particles of sand scouring the surface of Sargan IV.

A heavy bumping on one of the fins penetrated his thoughts. Henderson listened, waiting for it to be repeated and a little disappointed that when the knock was repeated it wasn't the code signal he and de Voile had used. He made his way groggily to the backbone ladder and slid down it to the airlock, expecting Boronay to enter. When the man who climbed aboard pulled away the native-made cloth covering his face Henderson's whole nervous system collapsed and dropped him helpless to the deck. The man was Alexander Patterson.

Henderson recovered, laying in his bunk, confident that de Voile had returned and that he had allowed himself to become too disturbed over killing Patterson. Weakly he called out, to ensure himself of his sanity:

"De Voile."

It was no good. Patterson walked to his bunk, a cup of the inexhaustible coffee in his hand.

"Relax, Henderson," he murmured.

Henderson nodded as best he could with his head on the pillow and idly scratched an itching spot on his forearm.

"I injected you with a tranquiliser," said Patterson. "You'll take things more calmly this way . . ."

"But you're dead," protested Henderson wildly. "I killed you myself and that heatgun made a frightful mess of your left side. You couldn't have lived, you couldn't . . . !"

"Calm down man. You cut me down with a heat-beam and you're a doctor. You know when a man's dead and I assure you that by an Earthman's standards I was dead. By Ghensar's I was not. That make's things easier for you, I hope."

Henderson's tensed muscles relaxed suddenly, leaving him breathless.

"I'm sorry, Alex. It must have hurt . . ."

Patterson looked him squarely in the eyes.

"It did."

"I'm sorry," mumbled Henderson afresh. "I . . . I . . ."

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"It's finished now," interrupted Patterson. "If I had managed to get that wire out of your ship before you returned we all would have been saved a great deal of trouble. Unfortunately I was just too late and Ghensar was unable to help me immediately. The intention was to talk with you both to see what decision we could reach. De Voile's staying: "Now we want to know about you."

"Alex!" called Henderson as Patterson turned to leave. "Why did you destroy your ship?"

"I've been here eighteen months, Henderson, and I know that although I have the reputation of being erratic, that however justified I might feel in going along with Ghensar, sooner or later I should want to go back to a little cottage in Portree on the Isle of Skye. You understand?"

Henderson, not trusting himself to speak, moved his head slightly in the affirmative. He watched Patterson until he disappeared behind a bulkhead and listened to the sounds detailing his progress down the ladder to the airlock, heard it whine open and close. It was a good job, he reckoned, that he had nothing on Earth which might have as great a fascination for him as Portree had for Patterson. There would be no danger of him wanting to return to Earth if he were in Patterson's position. Then, encouraged by the tranquiliser, he fell asleep.

Henderson awoke, one thing clear in his mind. Here was a clarion call such as he, whose nature was one to respond to clarion calls, had never before experienced. The rational part of his nature which a scientific training had welded onto him withered beneath an overwhelming onslaught of emotion which made him clench his fist and brought a faint tingle to his eyes. He could never, never refuse this call, a call which made him an instrument in a plan to turn Homo Sapiens from fighters and spoilers into a race-of beings with the skill and achievements of Ghensar. It would have to be a slow process, one admirably suited to an immortal—or, whispered a doubting part of his mind, a megalomaniac.

There was doubt, awful doubt, in Henderson's mind over Ghensar's sincerity but if he left Sargan IV he would never return to the planet irrespective of which report he submitted to the Lord High Admiral. Either a battle-fleet or nothing would come and humanity needed a chance. Ghensar had

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said he would reduce humanity to barbarism again if necessary.

There was a way out. Henderson got out of his bunk and drank his last can of coffee. He put on his atmosphere suit and sought out a coil of wire from the ship's stores. He rigged it and tested the circuit before fitting the charge which would wreck the ship. He put on an atmosphere suit and trailing the cable lowered himself to the airlock.

Out in the howling wind and searing, bitter sand he trudged the regulation quarter of a mile from the ship, laid down in the sand and pulled the slack cable towards him. Suddenly there was a roar and, partly obscured by the sand, a flash of light. The ground trembled for a few moments.

Henderson rose to his feet, carrying a self-imposed responsibility greater than any previously known to man. Either way, with Ghensar or against it, he had to balance forces and make sure that nothing ever wrecked any civilisation as thoroughly as the clash between Ghensar's race and the previous humanity.

He grinned wryly. After all, a call of such magnitude was one a person of his temperament just couldn't fail to answer.

Peter Hawkins

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Outstanding news for the next issue is that we shall be publishing the first *new* Robert A. Heinlein story to be written for many years, the author having concentrated on novels since 1950. " Menace From Earth " is not at all the type of story the title infers ; even authors are allowed some limits of satire in this respect ! Additional stories are by Lan Wright, Bertram Chandler and others, plus the conclusion of Dan Morgan's " The Uninhibited," and probably a full report of the World Science Fiction Convention.

Story ratings for No. 60 were :

1. Misfit ..... Alan Barclay
2. Fabulous Photographer ..... John Boland
3. Eye Of The Beholder ..... John Brunner
4. Sunrise On Mercury ..... Robert Silverberg
5. Golden Age ..... Philip E. High
   Stress Complex ..... Francis G. Rayer

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Peter Keenan and his colleagues from the planet Lessigia are now finding that they are becoming increasingly the hunted as the uninhibited Earth telepaths become more organised. As the action moves to the Birmingham area the Lessigians run into the full mental force of their opponents.

THE UNINHIBITED

By Dan Morgan

Part Two of Three Parts

FOREWORD

Peter Keenan, to give him the name he is known by on Earth, is a member of a small group of individuals from the planet Lessigia who are stationed in England to inhibit babies born with telepathic instincts, thus making them non-receptive to exterior thoughts. In the wide Galactic Federation to which the Lessigians belong, telepathic humans had once developed naturally but been persecuted and finally exterminated. To guard against a similar occurrence on Earth and to nurse the telepathy gene to maturity for the benefit of all the Federation the Lessigians are on Earth to trace and control all such human beings who are born with a telepathic tendency. By means of a Vion detector they can detect such a tendency before actual birth, one Lessigian then attending the birth in the guise of a doctor and planting a tiny inhibitor needle deep in the child's brain, thus blocking out extraneous thought-streams.

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Keenan is present at the birth of a son to Charles and Judy Martin in Guildford, where he has fallen in love with Judy's sister Marie. The baby recognises the apparent menace in Keenan's mind and communicates its fear to Marie, who is herself an inhibited telepath. Keenan however plants the inhibitor needle, silences the child's mental cries for help and pacifies Marie. By Lessigian law he should then have erased from her memory all knowledge of himself but because of his feelings for her he fails to do so.

Marie checks with the doctor who should have attended her sister and finds that he does not know Doctor Keenan. A check at Keenan's Hotel shows that he has left without trace. Meanwhile, Keenan has gone to the Lessigian headquarters at Russell Square in London where he reports to his chief, Lockyer, who censures him for not erasing Marie's memory and orders him to return to Guildford at once and do so.

Meanwhile, at the St. Vincent Neurological Hospital in Surrey, senior surgeon Ralph Tern performs a delicate brain operation on a man named Dashiell and discovers one of the inhibitor needles. Dashiell recovers to find that he is a telepath and gradually learns to control his new gift while Tern and his assistant decide to keep their knowledge secret for the time being.

Keenan, having seen Marie again and once more failed to erase her memory, is driving back to London when he finds his mind taken over by another powerful mental force. In the ensuing battle of wills his car is wrecked and the contact broken, but not before he is certain that his attacker must be an uninhibited Earth-human. Reporting this disastrous event to Lockyer it is decided that they must send an urgent report to Anrael, their immediate superior who is stationed in Birmingham, who will inform Lessigia of the unexpected development. Contact with Anrael by radio proves impossible as the Birmingham group fails to answer and it is decided that Keenan together with Pattin and Megoran shall try and trace the uninhibited telepath who mentally attacked Keenan.

Assisted by their Vion detector the trail leads to the St. Vincent Neurological Hospital and Pattin opens his mind in an attempt to contact the human telepath. Within moments he is dead, his mind blasted out of existence by the overwhelming power of the Earthman. Leaving Megoran in the car, Keenan gets inside the hospital only to find that Dashiell has disappeared, apparently driven away in an ambulance.

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VIII.

"Who the devil are you?"

Keenan's sub-voc scanned out to the thought-stream of the sharp-featured, elderly man who lay on the littered floor of the ward, and identified him as Tern, the surgeon who had operated on Dashiell. Probing further he gained a blurred memory image of two men who had entered the ward a few minutes before and forced Tern to stand by whilst they ordered the sensitive out of bed and pumped the contents of a hypodermic into his arm. Then the shattering memory of a revolver butt crashing down on the skull of Tern.

A suspicion was already growing in the mind of the surgeon that Keenan was connected with the kidnapping. His control was still hazy, but as soon as he was able to walk Tern would raise the alarm and Kennan's way out of the hospital would be blocked. And the Lessigian was in no position to fight his way out against any kind of physical opposition; his first attempt would be blocked by the conditioning and after that he would be helpless.

"Help me . . ." Tern was raising himself painfully on one arm.

There was no time. Despite the sympathy he felt for the elderly surgeon, Keenan *had* to leave now if he was to catch up with the sensitive who was being carried further away every minute in the retreating ambulance. Without answering the plea he rushed out into the corridor again. Obviously the kidnappers could not have taken Dashiell down by the elevators and through the main entrance hall of the hospital, so there must be some other convenient exit.

Keenan turned right, away from the elevators, walking past a nurse who was wheeling a trolley of instruments towards the door of Dashiell's ward. As he rounded a corner he saw a red-painted door a few yards away. Hurrying forward he pushed it open and found himself standing on the metal landing of an emergency stairway which threaded its way down the side of the building to the ground. This must be the way the kidnappers and their victim had escaped. He ran quickly down the stairs and round to the front of the hospital.

Megoran was seated in his car with the engine running. Keenan jumped into the passenger seat. "Get going! Don't stop for anything," he shouted, looking over his shoulder through the rear window. As yet there was no sign of alarm, the front of the building was quiet.

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Megoran flashed him a brief, questioning glance and slammed the car into gear. A moment later they were racing down the drive away from the hospital.

" Did you see a cream-painted ambulance leave a couple of minutes ago ? " asked Keenan.

Megoran nodded. " Yes. It turned right out of the main gates, going like hell."

" Good ! Follow it. Dashiell is in there—somebody has kidnapped him."

Megoran's broad face puckered questioningly as he swung the car out onto the main road. As Keenan had feared, the ambulance was already out of sight beyond the switchback of hills.

" They've got a good start on us," Megoran said. " Who are they ? "

" I don't know, but whoever they are they play rough. They knocked out the surgeon to get hold of Dashiell." Keenan settled back in the seat and closed his eyes. " Keep going, whatever happens. We've got to find out where they are taking him."

" What are you doing ? " Megoran snatched a quick glance away from the road.

" I'm going to try and make contact with Dashiell again. They've drugged him so it should be fairly safe, and I might learn something."

" You don't know how long the effect of the drug will hold a mind like his," protested Megoran.

" I've got to take that chance." Tensing himself for immediate withdrawal Keenan stepped up his sub-voc; aware that he might shortly face the same writhing death which had claimed Pattin.

At first there was nothing. Keenan stepped up the amplification warily, cautious of the effect of a sudden blast of Dashiell's thought-stream on his own consciousness. The range of the sensitive was theoretically unlimited, but in practice even normal minds radiated sufficiently to have considerable interference value on the level of amplification at which he was working.

Scanning outwards now at the peak of his range he was picking up all kinds of jumbled impulses from the occupants of the vehicles along the route, and also the high-pitched hum of Megoran's shielding pattern. Then for a moment forcing

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itself through the interference he caught a slight echo of Dashiell's more complex pattern, but it faded almost immediately.

He damped out the sub-voc and opened his eyes again. "They're still somewhere ahead. Push it as much as you can, will you?"

Megoran's broad mouth tightened. "Just so long as we don't pick up a police patrol, or break our darned necks."

They rushed onwards. There was more traffic now on the highway and Megoran gripping the wheel, weaved a complex pattern in and out of the vehicles along the route.

"What do you intend to do if we *do* catch up with them?" asked Megoran. They were climbing a long, steeply graded hill, and there was still no sign of the ambulance.

"All we can do at the moment is find out where they are taking Dashiell. Then we'll head back to Lockyer. If we know where to make contact with them it will at least give us some advantage, then we can proceed cautiously and find out just who we are up against."

"That *would* be helpful," Megoran said wryly. "Then what do we do—ask them to be good boys and let us re-inhibit Dashiell?"

"Perhaps." Keenan closed his eyes again. "Carry on, I'm going to try again." He stepped up his sub-voc. The interference level was much greater now, a confused torrent of unintegrated mind-stuff. However much he stepped up the power he was not able to pick up anything resembling Dashiell's vibrations. The jumble increased to almost unbearable proportions, growing every second.

It was hopeless. He switched down again and opened his eyes as they reached the brow of the hill. In the valley beneath lay a large town, the source of the interference. Dashiell might be anywhere; in the middle of thousands of radiating minds which damped out his own signal at this distance, or out and away over the other side of the town and in open country again.

"It's no good," Keenan said.

"Why?"

"We couldn't pick him out of that lot without using a Vion detector to give us a lead."

"Any good cruising around the town on the off-chance?"

"No, we've lost him." Keenan shrugged. "It would be like looking for one pea in a cartload."

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Megoran slackened the pace of the car. "Where to now, then?"

"Back to Lockyer—and let's hope he's had more luck than us," Keenan said. If only they had arrived at the hospital just those few minutes earlier. But then perhaps he *was* lucky—what would have happened if he had arrived at the same time as the people who had kidnapped Dashiell?

It was growing dusk as they passed through Russell Square. Both of them were silent, each rapt in his own thoughts and fears for the future. Now in addition to the problem of handling an uninhibited sensitive they were faced with the certain knowledge that some other organised group had kidnapped Dashiell who could be used as a weapon against them. Now, unprotected as they were, they faced not one enemy, but many.

Lockyer took the news badly, his pale hands moving tremulously, fingering the fawn robe which he was again wearing.

"What can we do now?" His dark eyes flitted from one to the other anxiously.

"You must contact Anrael again," Keenan said. "Tell him we need the help of his group immediately so that we can comb the area for these people."

Lockyer's hands moved to his thin throat. "We can go into hiding. Anrael is trying to contact Lessigia on the long-range communicator. Perhaps there will be new instructions—they will send help . . ."

Keenan sighed. "Don't you understand, Lockyer? It will take weeks for a ship to reach us, and these people strike swiftly, without warning. Wherever we hide they can find us with the help of Dashiell. We *must* act now—if he can be re-inhibited we may stand a chance of surviving until the relief ship arrives; otherwise we shall be wiped out."

"He's right," said Megoran sternly. "Do as he says, Lockyer."

The head of the project hesitated for a moment, looking old, so old and very frail. Then he moved slowly over to the radiogram cabinet in the corner of the lounge which concealed the short-range communicator.

"You've got guts, Keenan, I'll give you that," Megoran said softly. "But do you really believe we *can* do anything, crippled by the conditioning?"

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"We'll meet that problem when the time comes," Keenan said. "Anything is better than cowering like animals until they see fit to destroy us."

Megoran smiled grimly. "You're a good man, Keenan. Pattin had you figured wrong."

Keenan eyed the stocky man, wondering just what he meant by that remark, but before he had time to pursue the matter Lockyer turned from the communicator and spoke, his voice hoarse with fear.

"I don't understand it—there's no reply. Anrael usually comes in right after my first call—always for the past ten years . . ."

Keenan had never met Anrael, but he guessed that the head of the Birmingham section was another doddering old incompetent like Lockyer; a starry-eyed dreamer who had no business to be anywhere but inside the protecting walls of some university back on Lessigia. Such a man would be of little use in the coming struggle; the other two in the section, Warnock and Huizinger were the ones he needed. Warnock was an electronics expert, cool and efficient with imagination and courage; and Pelee Huizinger was the lifelong friend with whom he had done his training on joining the project. At the back of his mind was the faint hope that Warnock might be able to suggest some way of nullifying the conditioning which crippled them; and Huizinger was a good man to have around in any emergency.

"Try again," Keenan said.

"It's not like Anrael," murmured Lockyer. "The only thing I can imagine is that he is still in contact with Lessigia."

"Or asleep . . ." gritted Keenan angrily.

Two whole hours passed and still the communicator remained silent.

"It's no good." Lockyer rose from his seat, stretching his cramped limbs. "I shall have to try again tomorrow. There may be some quite simple explanation for this. The usual procedure . . ."

"Usual procedure!" Keenan flung out his arms, exasperated. "Haven't you any imagination, man? There may not *be* any tomorrow for us. This is too much of a coincidence."

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"We have no reason to believe that these people are operating in the Birmingham area," objected Megoran.

"We had no reason to be lieve that they *even existed* until a few hours ago—but what does that prove?" Keenan said. "They may know more about us than we imagine. For instance, if they knew that we depended on the Birmingham communicator for contact with home base, wouldn't that be the logical place to strike first?"

"But as far as we know they have only one sensitive, and he is in London," protested Megoran."

"True—but there are other, equally effective ways of attacking our people. Remember, *they* have no anti-violence conditioning to contend with—they can use any means they wish to destroy us. We can't afford to wait, Megoran. I must go to Birmingham and find out what has happened; I can be there in a few hours."

Megoran placed a restraining hand on the arm of the younger man. "No, Keenan, wait. Think of it this way. For all we know, these people may be watching *us* now, but we cannot be certain that they even suspect the existence of the Birmingham group. If you were to go up there they might follow, and you yourself might be the means of bringing about their destruction."

Keenan considered for a moment. Perhaps he had been too hasty. "You *could* be right," he admitted. "What do you suggest?"

"We'll call Anrael every hour through the next twenty-four —*then* if there is still no reply we shall be certain that there is something wrong, and you can do no harm by going."

Keenan nodded. "That makes sense. I'll play it your way for the time being." The thought occurred to him that either way he might be playing into the hands of their enemies, but he kept it to himself. A man had to make his choice and stick by it, win or lose.

IX.

Ralph Tern extended his hands, palms downwards and studied them anxiously. The tremor was still there, small, and not yet sufficiently serious to interfere with his work as a surgeon—but it was a warning which he could not ignore. He caressed the aching wound at the back of his scalp again. The attack and the kidnapping of Dalshiell had been a profound

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shock to him, and his very helplessness had somehow made him freshly aware of the fact that he was no longer a young man. Luckily, Hughes had been the first person to arrive in the wrecked ward. But, despite the concern of his assistant, Tern had refused to allow the police to be informed of the kidnapping. Whether he was morally correct in this or not, he felt that making the matter public would only result in undesirable publicity both for the hospital and himself.

He looked out through the glass doors of the lounge at the colours of the rose garden, standing out now vividly in that fleeting moment before dusk enfolded their beauty. He had a comfortable house, a place of mellow eighteenth century charm; but it was not the same since Madge had died five years before. Home for him now was in the functional modernity, the shining corridors and antiseptic odour of the hospital.

He rose to his feet and walked with the shuffling gait of an old, aimless man towards the glass doors. What could the future hold? His greatest triumphs and his greatest happiness lay behind him. All he could look forward to now was the gradual running down of the clock of his life, a diminuendo ceasing at the grave. This Dashiell business was sapping his energy. He had the feeling that he was out of his depth, that somehow he had failed in his trust as a doctor in allowing the man to be kidnapped.

He squared his slight shoulders angrily as he detected the trend of self-pity in his thoughts. This was not, had never been, his way of approaching life.

"Good evening, Doctor Tern. I was told that I might find you here," said a deep voice behind him.

The little surgeon wheeled instantly alert. "What the devil . . . ?"

"I'm sorry. I must have startled you." The intruder fingered the lapel of his opulent, fawn tween suit. He was a big man, powerfully built and very tall. His face was broad, with a high domed forehead from which the hair receded in carefully groomed greyness. There was a certain air about him, an aura of power, and smiling confidence in that power.

"Who let you in here—what do you want?" demanded Tern.

"I came in by the front door. It was unlocked," replied the intruder smoothly. "I had no wish to alarm you—I apologise again."

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"Then you can let yourself out the same way," snapped Tern. "Good day."

"Let me introduce myself," said the intruder, with calm persistence. He moved towards Tern. His body, big though it was, moved with the lithe grace of some hunting animal as he towered over the surgeon. "My name is Gregory, Damon Gregory. If you will give me a few moments of your time, I can assure you that you will not regret it."

"And if I call the police?" Tern looked towards the phone on a nearby table.

Gregory laughed, a low, vibrant sound. "Please, Doctor Tern—do I look like a housebreaker?"

Tern avoided the steady gaze; for the moment seeing himself as a rather foolish, crotchety old man. "Very well, Mr. Gregory. Please state your reasons for coming here—but be brief."

Gregory slipped one large, beautifully proportioned hand into the breast pocket of his elegant jacket and produced a small, black leather case.

"Have you ever seen one of these before, doctor?" he asked, offering it to Tern.

The surgeon took the case, aware once more of the tremor of his hands. It was growing darker now, and he switched on a nearby standard lamp before opening the case. A tiny crystalline needle glittered and flashed as he moved it into the light.

Tern looked sharply at the intruder. "Where did you get this?"

"No, doctor, I have not burgled your laboratory. But that is exactly what you think it is."

"What do you know about these things?" asked Tern swiftly.

"A good deal more than you," Gregory said. "I believe that you found one in the brain of your patient Dashiell?"

Tern stiffened. "You know about Dashiell?"

"Only that he was kidnapped from your hospital shortly after he had revealed his telepathic abilities." The voice was warm, so devoid of malice that even Tern's prickly disposition did not respond resentfully. "I only mention this because it is the main reason why it is so important that you should co-operate with me."

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" But you know where Dashiell is ? " asked Tern.

" No—I did not say that," replied Gregory. " But I think I know the identity of his kidnappers. I'm afraid that it is unlikely that you will ever again see him alive."

Tern's agitation increased. " How do you know so much?"

" It is part of my work. I became aware of his existence whilst he was in the hospital. I had intended to contact him through you in the near future, but I had underestimated my opponents."

" Your opponents—who are you talking about ? "

" The people who smuggled him out of the hospital that day." The large head inclined. " But please, you must listen to the whole story—or at least as much of it as I am able to tell you at the moment. Later developments will depend largely upon your co-operation and I am sure that you will not deny that when you hear what I have to say." Gregory waved a hand in the direction of the chairs by the fireplace. " Would you care to sit down ? This may take some time."

Tern found himself moving towards a chair before he had time to consider the action, and momentarily cursed himself for his suggestibility. But there was something, some quality about this man which inspired . . . what was the word ? Confidence ?

He looked down at the crystal needle. " First, you must tell me. *What is this thing* ? "

" A weapon to conquer a world," Gregory said.

Tern stirred uneasily in his chair, wondering what kind of a fanatic this man was.

The suggestion of a smile played about Gregory's lips. " No, Doctor Tern. I am not trying to impress you with melodramatics—that is the literal truth. When you removed that sliver of crystal from the brain of Dashiell, you opened a new era of hope for the survival of the human race, by restoring to him the possession of his natural powers of telepathy."

" *Natural powers* ? But surely the man is a freak—such abilities do not exist amongst normal people."

" No ? You are wrong, doctor. There are several hundred men and women possessed of the same potential powers walking the earth at this minute."

Tern shook his head. " I can't accept that. If there were other telepaths in existence they would have made themselves known. Such a power could not remain hidden for long."

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"You misunderstand me. I said *potential* power. Not even these people themselves are aware of its existence. If you were to operate on them, in each case you would find a crystal needle identical in size and structure with the one you removed from Dashiell embedded in their brain tissue. And upon its removal they would be endowed with the same gift."

Tern looked sharply at the intruder. "You are implying that the presence of these things, whatever they may be, inhibits the telepathic faculty?"

"Precisely," agreed Gregory.

"A pretty theory—but why have none of them come to light before this, if that is the case?"

"How many surgeons are there capable of probing into the living brain at such a depth as you did on that occasion? And even if there more than a handful in the world, what is the likelihood that they would have chanced to operate on one of this small group?"

Tern leaned forward, studying the broadly handsome face. "These things are only to be found in the brains of a few hundred potential telepaths?"

"Yes."

"Then how do you come to know of them? What proof have you?"

"That you can find for yourself, doctor. In my investigation I have already contacted a number of people whom I believe to be potential telepaths, with their powers lying dormant under the influence of these inhibiting mechanisms. You can operate on one of these people and verify the theory for yourself."

Tern's delicate hands clutched at the arms of the chair. "You must be mad, man! How can you imagine that I would perform a highly dangerous operation on a perfectly healthy person, merely to prove some crackpot theory?"

Gregory reached forward and took the case containing the crystal from the small table where Tern had laid it. "I am not dealing in crackpot theories, Doctor Tern. Dashiell was kidnapped precisely because one of these things was removed from his brain by you. This is part of a pattern which I have been observing for a number of years now. When I said that the survival of the human race might depend on your abilities I was not making a bad joke, or exaggerating."

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" Yoy may recall the flying saucer scares of a few years back. The thing was played out quite soon by the blatherings of the popular press, but after eliminating all the hysterical nonsense there still remained a hard core of information which pointed to the fact that this planet was under observation by extra-terrestrial intelligences."

Despite his immediate resentment at the introduction of what he had always considered merely pseudo-scientific nonsense, Tern found himself curiously interested.

" What has all this to do with Dashiell ? " he asked.

" A great deal," continued Gregory. " We now know that the earth is not only being observed in the sense we had guessed from the saucer incidents, but that there exist at this moment, temporarily based in this country, a number of groups of extra-terrestrial humanoids. It was one of these groups which kidnapped Dashiell."

" That is completely fantastic," objected Tern.

" I agree," admitted Gregory. " But then so is the idea of a true telepathic sensitive, and yet you have been forced to accept it from your own experience. *There are more things in heaven and earth, Doctor Tern, remember* ? "

" If what you say is true, why haven't these people revealed themselves ? " asked Tern, aware that he was mouthing the words despite the fearful equation which was beginning to form in his own mind.

" For a very good reason," Gregory said. " My men have had one of these alien groups under observation for some time. Outwardly they seem to be normal human beings, but careful investigations into their past has revealed no information as to their origins. Whatever we did we could not unearth their antecedents. People who had associated with them developed a kind of selective amnesia which rendered them totally useless when questioned.

" Following their movements we gradually built up a picture of their activities. It was difficult to pinpoint any constant factor about their associations with normal Earth people, except that one of them always seemed to be with a family at the time of, or just after, a birth had taken place. Then soon afterwards, quietly and unobtrusively, he would drop out of the picture—so completely, because most of the people concerned developed this selective forgetting and had no knowledge of him whatsoever when questioned."

" But what is the purpose of all this ? " asked Tern.

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"That question puzzled us for a long time. But we felt that it would be unwise to take one of them into custody for questioning at this time. We guessed that they must be some sort of reconnaissance group, but they seemed to have no interest whatsoever in military installations. Their only apparent activity was the formation of these brief associations with selected families. Before we attempted to pick one of them up we decided to investigate this pattern more fully. But until the recent events in which you played a part we had nothing more than a flock of wild theories.

"We now believe that these aliens have certain telepathic abilities, but that they are not of the same order as those of Earthborn sensitives like Dashiell. They see in the Earthborn sensitives the only important obstacle to a full-scale invasion and this reconnaissance group's function is the inhibition of these abilities in the sensitives." Gregory pointed at the crystal needle. "This is the instrument which they are using for that purpose—a tiny transmitter which is automatically activated when inserted deep in the brain of a telepath and sets up an inhibiting field."

"But surely if this were made public, the resources of the entire world would be at your disposal?" said Tern. "If you know the whereabouts of these aliens there must be some way in which they could be destroyed."

Gregory nodded. "No doubt we *could* kill them. But if we did so by normal, physical means it would not help us. More of them would come; this time possibly a full-scale invasion which we would have no hope of resisting. Don't you see? The telepathic factor is their Achille's heel. With all their resources they are not sufficiently confident of their ability to control the Earthborn sensitives. They might conquer temporarily, but there would always be the chance of the sensitives striking back at them, and they are not willing to take that risk."

Tern could not help but be fully convinced of the man's sincerity. "I still do not see why you want me to perform these operations. What would be the good, if it were to precipitate a full-scale invasion?"

"No, don't you see? The sensitives are the only factor which will prevent that." said Gregory. "If you removed the inhibitors from the brains of a number of the sensitives we

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would have a force capable not only of dealing with the reconnaissance groups, but of convincing these aliens that an invasion would not be worth the risk. We could destroy the groups one by one, with the sensitives taking the offensive and killing by the use of their powers. There would be no use of ordinary physical force, as this might bring a like retaliation."

"Then surely they would bring such devastating power to bear on us that they would obliterate all opposition," said Tern grimly. "If they are so far advanced technologically they must be capable of that?"

"Technologically perhaps, but not culturally. Consider the facts; if they were possessed of such an attitude they would not have approached the matter of conquest through the methods they have used so far. They have inhibited the sensitives, rather than killing them—and they have delayed making an invasion in force. Not only because of their fear of the sensitives, but because they do not wish to wage a bloody, primitive war. I believe that they are a highly intelligent, sensitive people, who do not want conquest on those terms."

"And if we prove to them that we are able to fight back in this way, despite their efforts, you believe that they will decide to leave us in peace?" asked Tern.

"That is my hope," Gregory said. "After all, there must be a thousand planets in the universe which would suit them equally well for their purpose, whatever it may be. I think that once they see the kind of opposition we are capable of they will decide that Earth is not worth the lives of so many of their highly trained men and pass on to some other, more easily conquered world."

"And if you are wrong?" Tern's mind was floundering under the vastness of the concepts which Gregory had introduced, but still it retained sufficient sharpness to pursue all the logical implications.

"Then we shall have to find some other way to fight," Gregory said. "But I do not admit the possibility. They have shown us the way to be rid of them by their own actions. Why else would they have been operating in this way? After all, if it had not been for a lucky chain of events they might have succeeded. How could they have predicted that there would be a surgeon—on what must seem to them a primitive planet—who was capable of removing one of the inhibitors without killing the patient in the process?"

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Tern rose from his chair. All air of defeat gone from him now. Here, when he had thought that his world was crumbling about him he had suddenly been offered a task of such cosmic importance, such a challenge to his ability, that he once more felt that there was some object in life.

"Very well, Gregory." There was a new steadiness in his pale hand as he thrust it forward. "I am at your disposal—when can I see my first patient?"

Gregory gripped his hand firmly, and smiled. "Thank you, Doctor Tern. I have a car waiting outside. Can you come with me now?"

"Why not? I have no other immediate appointments," said Tern briskly.

"Very good," Gregory said. "I have an up-to-date laboratory ready equipped, and an operating theatre whose appointments I am sure you will approve."

The two of them walked towards the door. "I shall need a staff, of course," Tern said.

"That has already been taken care of," said Gregory. "Your assistant Hughes has been fully informed and we have left a great deal of the preparation in his hands."

X.

A distant clock chimed hollowly, sending three ripples of sound across the silent pool of the sleeping city. In the lounge of Lockyer's flat Keenan abandoned the still silent communicator wearily and switched off the light. Manoeuvring his lengthy body into position on the couch he lay uncomfortably, his eyes wide open in the darkness, looking up at the invisible ceiling.

One thought chased another through his racing brain and sleep was a thousand miles away. He sighed, swung his feet over onto the floor and raised himself to a sitting position. Fumbling in his pocket he produced a pack of cigarettes and some matches.

There was an uneasiness, a tension about the very air he breathed as he sat there contemplating the glow of his cigarette. Whilst he was wasting his time here a hundred stealthy moves might be taking place; moves that would bring about the destruction of himself and all the other Lessigians on Earth. Perhaps the enemy had already struck in the Birmingham area, wiping out all three of the group there. That seemed the only answer to the persistent silence of the communicator.

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And Marie . . . Keenan's throat tightened. It was unlikely that he would ever see her again—the way events were developing there was no future, either with or without her.

He stood up abruptly, as if by the movement to distract the thought-stream, and walked slowly towards the lighter rectangle of the window. Pulling aside the curtain he looked down onto the night-bound street, the darkened windows of its houses and shops dead eyes closed in sleep.

Overhead a thin slice of moon gave the night a cold grey illumination. Behind it lay a carpet of stars, reaching across the galaxy to a home that seemed to grow further away every second. He stood for several minutes looking upwards in a reverie that held no comfort, building itself an ache of misery in his mind.

Something tugged at his drifting consciousness and made him look quickly downwards to the street again. A long, sleek shape with muted lights purred round the corner and went along past the flat, slowing gradually. About a hundred yards further down on the opposite side of the road a dark figure emerged from a doorway and raised an arm.

The car pulled to a gentle halt alongside the figure and someone got out. The two men stood for a moment in quiet conversation, then one of them got into the car. Keenan saw a pale blur as the man on the sidewalk looked up in his direction. The car moved away out of sight, gathering speed, and the man it had left behind walked slowly along the street towards the window where Keenan stood, with the measured tread of a person who has nothing else to do for the next few hours but pace and watch, watch and wait.

And Keenan, all his tension now crystallised into wakeful alarm stood in the shadow of the curtain watching the man as he turned like a sentry at the corner and began to walk slowly, inexorably back, the dull pad of his footsteps underlining the growing certainty.

He had *not* succeeded in shaking off the pursuit of the sensitive the night before—or Lockyer's flat had already been a well-known point of reference to the enemy. Now it made no difference which was the truth; the flat was being watched. For what purpose?

It came as a stomach-twisting coldness to know that the enemy held the three members of the London section in the poised palm of his hand, and to wonder how long it would be before that hand closed with crushing strength. As it had already on the members of the Birmingham group?

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Keenan moved swiftly away from the window, back towards the couch. He picked up his jacket and put it on. His eyes were fully adapted to the darkness now and there would be no point in switching on the light to alert the watcher. He walked over to the dim shape of the radiogram and eased it carefully away from the wall. Feeling along the back of the cabinet his hand contacted cold metal. With a slight jerk he unclipped the clumsy, Earth-made revolver which he knew Lockyer kept there, and whose only possible purpose for the old man he now understood could be as an opening to the escape of suicide. For him it would be something else—a card in the dangerous game of bluff.

A wave of nausea flooded over him as he examined the weapon and he guessed that this was a foretaste of the effects of his anti-violence conditioning. How strong that conditioning was he had no way of knowing—but he was about to test it.

He had no intention of attacking the watcher. But the man was not aware that the person who accosted him would be powerless to carry out the threat embodied in the weapon. Keenan wanted a quiet talk; a chance to get at some facts and find out just who and what were these patient enemies who were biding their time in this way. With the weapon as a visible symbol of his power he hoped that it would be possible to bluff the man into talking. The answers he wanted would not flow freely in speech, but even wrong answers would suffice whilst he was following the other's train of sub-vocal thought which might reveal the right ones.

Keenan placed the revolver in his jacket pocket and picked his way carefully across the darkened room. At the door he stopped for a moment, listening to the rhythmic pattern of the breathing of Lockyer and Megoran.

Perhaps it would be better to awaken them. But then from Lockyer he would receive only a cautious veto on any activity whatsoever. The old man seemed willing to accept whatever fate lay in store for him. And Megoran . . . he would waste too much time in discussion. This assignment needed the calm stealth of one man—himself.

He let himself out onto the landing, closing the door behind him with the smallest of clicks, and made his way carefully down the stairs. The street door was an awkward, heavy thing with a clumsy lock which seemed to clatter loudly in the

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confined space. Easing it open gradually, Keenan placed one eye to the crack and looked out.

The watcher was walking along to the right, his back towards Keenan. He was about ten yards away and in another minute or so he would reach the other end of his circuit and turn again. The next task was to get out of the building and across to the other side of the street without the watcher seeing him. He wondered if the man was armed. It made no difference—at least it would be quick—better than the quivering despair of an animal waiting for the butcher's axe.

Keenan deliberately stepped up his sub-voc; aware as he did so that if the watcher was a sensitive this could be the end of the whole venture. It was a chance he had to take.

He strained forward, feeling a flush of relief as no burst of energy rocked his consciousness. It took him several seconds to locate the feeble thread that was the sub-vocal pattern of the watcher. The probing of a mind which had no sub-voc amplifier was a difficult and inaccurate business. But Keenan was not expecting detail—just a few hints, odd pieces to fit into the jigsaw of this mysterious conflict.

He eased the street door open further as he sensed the vibration had reached its peak and was growing more feeble. The man was to his left now. Keenan could see the dark outline of his overcoat and hat against the background of a light-coloured shop front.

Directly opposite Keenan was the darkened arcade of a clothing store. Taking a deep breath the Lessigian sprinted lithely across the street and into the shadows of the arcade. Standing, the blood pounding in his ears, he listened to the steady pad of the watcher's rubber soles as the man continued on his circuit.

He eased the revolver from his pocket and stood in the darkness waiting. A flood of nausea swept upwards from his stomach, bringing a cold sweat to his forehead. He fought it back, and listened as the footsteps stopped momentarily, then commenced again . . . coming closer. The hand that held the gun was clammy with sweat, its fingers stiff with tension.

The padding footsteps approached. Keenan struggled with himself as the conditioning, working on a thalamic level, produced all the bodily symptoms of panic. Even though he knew its cause it took all his self-control to allay the emotional storm which was building up inside him.

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The watcher appeared, abreast of Keenan. So far unaware of his presence. The Lessigian moved forward quickly, his legs trembling, his whole body screaming to release the adrenalin-borne flight-energy which poured into its blood-stream.

"Don't move—or I'll blast your spine." Keenan jabbed the muzzle of the gun into the man's back.

"What the . . . !" The voice of the watcher was a hoarse startled whisper.

Keenan, breathing deeply, trying to hold his scattering wits together, said: "Who sent you here? Why are you watching that house?"

"I don't know what you mean. Here, let me . . ." the man protested, still whispering, but more urgently.

A tremor was growing in Keenan now, as his muscles protested against the conscious control that was inhibiting their flight reaction to the automatic messages that the conditioning was pouring into them. His whole body-mind relationship was in a growing feedback oscillation. He realised sickly that once he loosened his conscious control in order to prove the man with his sub-voc he must collapse, or fall into some kind of convulsion. To tell himself that the conflict was only in his mind and caused by the conditioning had no more effect than telling a psychotic that his hysteric symptoms did not really exist. He was blocked, and fast reaching the stage where even speech would become difficult.

"*Keenan! What the hell are you doing, man?*" Megoran's sub-voc beamed in like a shaft of sanity on his consciousness.

"*Thank God!*" Keenan replied. "*Where are you?*"

"*On the stairs. I caught a blast of sub-voc a minute ago that was enough to waken the dead. Lockyer didn't get it though—he must have damped his right down.*"

"*This man was watching the flat. I've got Lockyer's gun on him. I was going to question him and probe him for the right answers, but I can't do it. I'll be lucky if I can hold him long enough to erase . . .*"

"*The conditioning?*"

"*It's hell!*" A violent tremor shook Keenan, his whole body was bathed in clammy perspiration. The sub-voc conversation was taking place at the speed of thought, without the need of clumsy articulation.

The captive shifted his balance, and Keenan guessed that he was weighing the chances of a sudden twist and a grab at the weapon.

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Keenan moved back a pace and said: " All right, you can turn round."

" *Don't let him go, Pether. I'm coming out there,*" came Megoran's thought. " *We should be able to get something out of him between us. You ask the questions and I'll probe his reactions.*"

" *All right, but I don't know how long I can keep it up,*" replied Keenan painfully. " *Have you got him now?*"

" *Yes. It's weak, but I think I can follow. It will improve as I get closer to him.*"

The man was facing him now, his face a pale blur beneath the hat. Keenan said: " Now let's try it again. You're watching the flat across the road from here, you've been on duty for about twenty minutes. I *know* that much, so let's not both waste our time. Who are you? And who are you working for?" The gun seemed to weigh a ton, but he managed to keep it steady.

" Why should I tell you?" The man's voice was sharp, with an edge of fear.

" I can think of one very good reason." Keenan realised that his own voice had a cracked, panic-borne quality, but there was nothing he could do about it.

" You wouldn't dare to shoot me here."

" What makes you think that I need to *shoot* you?" Out of the corner of his eye Keenan saw the door across the street open and Megoran's stocky figure emerge.

" *You hit him where he lives there,*" beamed Megoran. "*I caught something about aliens, and telepathy. He's scared, good and scared—and he doesn't know the real nature of what he is up against.*"

" What do you want from me?" The man's voice rose to a whine. " I was just told to report if anybody left or went in."

"Report to whom?" persisted Keenan.

" A client—I'm a private enquiry agent."

" What is the name of this client?" Keenan was limp now. At any moment the other might realise his weakness and grab for the gun. And if he did, the Lessigian would have no defence.

" Name of Jones . . ." the man hesitated, glancing down the street.

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"*He's lying, of course.*" Megoran was only a few feet away now, but he communicated sub-vocally to avoid the ear of the captive. "*I got a name in back there—Gregory. How are you feeling, Pether? Shall I take the gun?*"

"*No! The same thing would happen to you and then we surely wouldn't be able to handle him. This way we may make it,*" replied Keenan. "*I want you in full control so that you can erase him mnemonically when I have finished the questioning. I can't hold out much longer, though.*"

"*All right. I'm getting him clearly now. Shoot him a string of questions. It doesn't matter whether he answers them or not; I should be able to pick up the necessary data from his sub-vocal stream.*"

"*All right. Get set and don't miss a thing.*" Keenan spoke to the man again. "Where is Gregory?"

The man recoiled at the sound of the name. "Gregory? I don't know who you're talking about." He was slightly off-balance now, wondering where Keenan had gained his knowledge.

"How many of you are there?" pursued Keenan. "Why are you watching us? Where is Dashiell?. Are there others like him? And if so, how many?" He was firing the questions in rapid succession now, hoping that Megoran was picking up some of the answers.

The gun was growing heavier and heavier, dragging his arm downwards. His whole body-mind relationship was in chaos now, the endocrine secretions fighting his conscious control for mastery of his muscle tissue.

A wave of shining whiteness was moving in, blanking his mind. The face of the man before him blurred and ran like a melting wax effigy.

The whiteness swelled and enveloped his whole being . . . And it was all there was . . .

"Pether!"

The first thing Keenan was aware of was that the gun was no longer in his hand. The white haze cleared and he found himself still standing in the darkened arcade. Every limb of his body ached with a searing discomfort. Megoran was shaking his arm.

"Pether, are you all right?"

"I—I—think so." He raised a shaking hand to his clammy brow. He looked round for the captive. "Where is he?"

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"Don't worry about him," said Megoran. "He'll come out of it in about half an hour's time, walking around the West End and wondering how the hell he got there."

Keenan breathed deeply, gulping in great lungfulls of the cool night air. "What happened to me?"

"The conditioning must have battered through your resistance at last. You went into a paralytic trance. Luckily, I was near enough to step in and take over before your captive had time to realise what was going on."

"And you erased him?"

"What else was there to do? Another few seconds and he would have grabbed for the gun." Megoran grasped Keenan's arm firmly. "Come on, let's get upstairs. You need rest; there may be after-effects from that trance."

"No, not yet." Keenan jerked himself free. "What did you get from his mind?"

"A few slivers of material that may fit into the pattern," Megoran said. "His name was Stacey. He is only a very minor cog in the mechanism. From what I could make out this Gregory is the head of the organisation. And there seemed to be some association between that name and Birmingham."

"You mean that Gregory may be in Birmingham?"

Megoran shook his head. "I don't know. Could be—but you know how vague these things are—just a flood of words, some of them pure fantasy, others cover up reactions."

"What else about Birmingham?" pursued Keenan urgently. "Was there anything which could be a reason for them not answering our calls?"

"No. It was mostly just a lot of unintelligible filth. But he wasn't working for money, that Stacey. He really hated us." Megoran shuddered at the recollection.

"Give me your car keys, Megoran," Keenan said softly.

"Why? You're in no shape to go anywhere. Come back to the flat and get some rest."

"And sit there till another of the keepers comes along. No, Megoran. Give me those keys."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To Birmingham. There has been too much delay already, but there may still be time for me to do something to help Pelee and the others."

The stocky man turned to face him. "I'm not going to let you go alone, Pether. Have you forgotten already? If I

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hadn't woken up and followed you down, God knows what might have happened to you."

"I realise that, and I'm thankful. But don't try my gratitude too much. There is work for me to do in Birmingham—now!"

"I know what you're trying to do, and I admire you for it. But you can't fight these people—every move you make will be blocked by your conditioning. You don't stand a chance."

Keenan shook his head stubbornly. "I've still got to *try*."

Megoran looked at him and the silence grew heavy between them. "All right," he said, at length. "If you insist on playing the hero. But why not wait until we've talked this over with Lockyer? Then I can come along with you."

"No! Give me the keys—I'm going alone."

"But we would stand a better chance together—you'll admit that?" protested Megoran.

"Possibly," admitted Keenan. "But there's work for you here. After I've gone I want you to explain to Lockyer what has happened. You've got to persuade him to go with you to your place, they may not have located that yet. And take the communicator with you."

Megoran shifted awkwardly. "Lockyer is still the head of the project."

"No—he's just a tired old man. The project in its original sense is finished, wrecked—surely you are intelligent enough and adaptable enough to realise that? It's a different kind of game now; one for which Lockyer is not equipped. If we leave the decisions to him we are lost. Take him to your place. Forcibly if necessary; it will be for his own good in the long run."

"And if he refuses?" protested Megoran.

"Take him! We're fighting for existence here, and don't you forget it. We can expect no help until the relief ship arrives, and that will be some time. This is no time for sticking to the rules. If any of us are going to be alive to meet that ship, we'll have to play this off the cuff."

"Perhaps I can make him understand."

"He'll do as he's told. He can't be that big a fool, surely?" They were at the street door of the flat now. Keenan thrust out his hand. "Come on, Megoran, we're wasting time. Do I get that key, or don't I?"

Megoran stood very still for a moment, then plunged his hand into his jacket pocket.

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"Here it is." He dropped the car key into Keenan's palm." You might be able to use this, too," he added, handing over the gun. "But be careful. Good luck, Pether."

"Thanks. Do what you can for that stiff-necked old fool up there. I'll call you from Birmingham."

Keenan turned away abruptly and walked along the street towards the square where Megoran's car was parked.

XI.

Birmingham was alive with the brisk impersonality of a big city in the early morning. The air that flowed through the open windows of the car had a chill which caught at the nostrils. Keenan's mind was crisp and alert with the expectancy of danger, despite the long night drive. He might be entering the very heart of the enemy's activity and he could not afford to relax for a moment.

He drove with swift care through the centre of the city and turned north at a junction of several highways. A few minutes later he was cruising through the old brown houses of a residential quarter. Without hesitating he turned the car into the street in which Anrael's section had their headquarters.

He slowed the car a couple of hundred yards away from the house and for the first time since leaving London, switched his sub-voc from its shielding pattern onto scan. There was no response. But it was possible that the three Lessigians, if they *were* inside the house, were not yet awake. His foot moved to the brake—and then abruptly back to the accelerator again, as he caught a sign of movement in a doorway to his right.

Without a second glance he drove on and turned left at the first intersection. A few yards along he stopped the car and got out. Was there somebody watching the house? Or had the man he had seen been merely a disinterested loiterer? He could not take a chance, he had to know.

He turned back into the road walking briskly and crossed over to the side opposite that on which the house stood. The man was standing, looking towards him. He was tall, with a muscular build and wearing a shabby single-breasted raincoat. There was an alertness in his pale grey eyes. Keenan deliberately fixed his gaze on the middle distance and strode on. About ten yards from the tall man he switched on the sub-voc again, turning up to almost full power, and probed.

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" *Seen him before . . . going past in a car . . . oh, what the hell am I waiting around here for . . . they've got the man who did it . . . chief just likes to give me jobs like this . . . I ought to get myself . . .*" The stream of jumbled subvocalisation faded and merged with the background emanations as Keenan drew further away from the raincoated man.

Nothing definite, but enough to tell him that here was a trained observer, sufficiently motivated to take note of his facial characteristics as he drove by in the car and to recognise him as he walked past again. Possibly the whole thing meant nothing, but Keenan was not in any position to take chances. So far, the enemy had no way of knowing that he was in Birmingham, and he could not afford to lightly throw away that advantage. If the man in the raincoat *was* one of them, all secrecy would be sacrificed as soon as he walked up to the front door of Anrael's house.

Without looking back he walked on to the next junction and turned right. This brought him to the gates of a school playing-field. He remembered what Pelee had said during one of their conversations a few months ago : " Yes, a pile of kids. Falling over each other and making a terrific racket. Remember when we were like that, Pether ? To think that we should have come half-way across the galaxy to find a race like this—we've so much in common with them. Sometimes I stand at one of the upstairs windows in the afternoons and watch them for hours . . ."

Keenan walked boldly through the gates and turned right along a path that ran beside a thick hedge. On the other side of that hedge were the gardens of the houses. There was no one in sight—but what if the man in the raincoat grew curious about his reasons for visiting a school playing-field at this hour of the morning ? He noted with satisfaction that the hedge grew more straggly as he moved further from the entrance gate and breathed a prayer in thanks for the lack of conscientiousness of the part of some groundsman.

When he reached the back of Anrael's house he found that there was sufficient gap in the hedge to permit his passage. He moved back quickly as a slatternly woman in an apron and carpet slippers emerged from the back door of the next house. A moment later there was the clatter of a dustbin-lid and the woman disappeared again.

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Keenan thrust his way through the hedge and sprinted through the unkempt garden. Reaching the back door he found that it was locked. The curtains were drawn on all the ground floor windows, but there was a slight gap of about a quarter of an inch between the frame and the sash of the one on his right.

He heard a loud clatter of uninhibited conversation behind him. A crowd of boys in shorts and jerseys were approaching along the path at the other side of the hedge. Placing his fingers underneath the window he pulled upwards. It resisted for a moment then moved with a slight creak.

As soon as the opening was wide enough he released his grip and bending his long body, crawled inside, pushing through the curtains. The room was quite dim after the morning sunlight and he stayed there by the window for a moment, half crouching, whilst his eyes adapted themselves to the gloom.

The room was a shambles. Cupboards and drawers had been opened and their contents strewn untidily about the floor. On his right, a large armchair lay on its side, its upholstery ripped open, the wadding of its interior sprawled obscenely like a disembowelled corpse.

Keenan's hand moved to his pocket and closed about the butt of the revolver. Instantly he felt a surge of nausea, but fighting it down he crept towards the door of the room. He stepped up his sub-voc again—pushing it to maximum call. If there was any Lessigian in the house, and his sub-voc was not entirely cut off, he must notice that call and reply.

There was no response. Keenan halted, his hand on the doorknob. Was it worth going on? Perhaps the section had evacuated these headquarters and the man outside the house was waiting for someone to return to the house—someone like Keenan.

Whatever the truth, he was already committed. He eased the door open and stepped through into a hallway. It was dimly lit by the daylight which filtered through the ugly, leaded stained-glass of the doorway and transom. The floor was tiled and his footsteps sounded with an echoing hollowness, despite his caution.

The first door on his right was slightly ajar. He pushed it open. The room stared back at him, with its welter of fussily ornate furniture, which he identified as Victorian. He remembered Pelee telling him about this room. He had called

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it Anrael's museum, a period piece in which the section leader had taken some pride. Not one piece of furniture or item of bric-a-brac seemed to have been disturbed.

Keenan walked out into the hall again. He was beginning to wonder just what it was he expected to find. Whatever had happened in the wrecked kitchen, there seemed to be nobody here now.

He froze in the act of walking towards the second door. Somewhere above him he had heard a slight creaking sound, as of a softly placed foot on a dry floorboard. But this was an old house; old houses were living things, full of their own kind of peculiar noises. He stood quite still for a moment. He could see clear across the road through a triangular piece of green glass in the door panel. A warped image of the man in the raincoat was applying a match to a cigarette, looking towards the house as he did so.

Keenan turned and looked up the mahogany-banistered staircase. The enemy was outside watching—then who, if anybody, was up there? He pulled the revolver out of his pocket and started up the stairs with swift, light steps.

A moment later he stood on the landing. Facing him was a circular window glazed with the same ugliness as the hall door. Up here the floor was carpeted. He moved forward cautiously, noticing that the door furthest away from him was open a few inches. Ignoring the others for the moment, he walked straight up to this and pushed it aside.

On a table opposite him lay a heap of jumbled electronic gear and a chassis which he recognised as that of a long range Sub-Etheric communicator. The outer casing of the communicator lay on the floor beneath the table. It was battered and had obviously undergone some very rough treatment. He moved closer, bending over the chassis, and saw that whole sections of the interior had been ripped away.

There was a slight sound behind him. He turned swiftly, the gun at the ready.

"Pether! It's you—thank heaven!" gasped the slight, dark-haired man who faced him. "How did you get past the watchdog out there?"

"I might ask you the same thing, Warnock." Keenan replaced the gun in his pocket and offered his hand in greeting. He grinned his relief. "Why didn't you make yourself known to me earlier—you might have got yourself shot?"

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Warnock nodded his head in the direction of the window. "I thought you might have been one of them."

Keenan walked over to the side of the window and looked down into the street. The man in the raincoat was still there.

"Who is he?"

Warnock wiped a hand over his glossy, black hair. "Police, I suppose—who else?"

"Why police?" asked Keenan, instantly alert.

"Anrael has been murdered," Warnock said.

"How? Where?"

"Downstairs in the kitchen, some time yesterday afternoon," replied Warnock. "You must have noticed the mess the place was in if you came in that way. I understand that his face and head were battered almost to a pulp."

Keenan's brain was already racing, trying to fit this new information in with the pattern of events of the last few days. This type of elimination did not fit in with the methods he had come to associate with the opposing group.

"It was brutal." Warnock's face was very pale, and a muscle at the side of his long nose twitched uncontrollably.

"And Huizinger?" Keenan forced himself to ask the question, tensing himself for the answer.

"In the hands of the police," Warnock said. "I understand that they are going to charge him with the murder."

No! This was madness. "How did it happen?" demanded Keenan.

"Pelee and I were out on an assignment—a female child over on the other side of the city," Warnock said. "We made a routine check phone call at mid-day. Pelee did the talking, but I was standing close, so that I could hear Anrael's voice. He sounded excited. He said that something had come up, something big that he could not discuss over the phone. He told Pelee to come back here right away and leave me to carry out the inhibition of the child. Pelee asked *what* had happened, but Anrael refused to give a more explicit answer."

"And so Pelee returned here alone. Are you sure that Anrael didn't say anything else—something that might have given you some idea of the cause of his agitation?"

Warnock frowned. "No, but there was one thing that I thought rather strange. He told us both not to use our sub-vocs under any circumstances."

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Keenan gripped at the edge of the table. Here, at least was some connection. " He didn't say why ? "

" No, and we didn't question his order. Pelee left me and I carried on with the assignment, arriving back here just before five o'clock. The place was swarming with police and there was a crowd of people outside. I hung around and picked up what I could from the bystanders."

" And Pelee ? " asked Keenan, anxiously.

" After I had been waiting about a quarter of an hour he was brought out of the house by two plain-clothes men and bundled into a car. I managed to make sub-voc contact with him briefly and he told me that he had arrived at the house to find Anrael lying in the kitchen. He was just bending over him to see if there was anything he could do when the police arrived and accused him of the crime."

" Who had called them ? " asked Keenan.

Warnock shrugged. " I don't know—we didn't have much time to communicate. As the car moved away Pelee reminded me of what Anrael had said about not using sub-voc and I felt him withdraw."

Keenan nodded. " That's why I wasn't able to reach you from the street when I arrived. It's just as well you did shut off your sub-voc—you probably saved your life by doing so."

" What do you mean ? " asked Warnock.

" Our mission on this planet is no longer a secret from a certain group in this country, and amongst that group is at least one uninhibited sensitive."

Warnock's eyes widened. " That's impossible ! "

" I think not," replied Keenan. " We have been aware of the activities of this group in the London area for several days now, but we have not been able to get very far. Anrael must have hit on something really important, something which made his immediate elimination necessary to them. Otherwise I think they would have been content to play a waiting game as they have been doing in the London area—except for an experimental attack on me a couple of nights ago."

" But we are not equipped to fight *anybody*," Warnock said.

" No," said Keenan. " Our only hope of remaining alive until the relief ship gets here is to keep out of range of these people."

Warnock leaned forward thoughtfully. " Unless we can do something about the conditioning."

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"What are you getting at?" Keenan eyed the little electronics expert with growing excitement.

"I was only about to point out that if such a command can be implanted in a mind, surely it must be possible to either erase it, or superimpose another which would nullify it?"

"What makes you so sure?" asked Keenan eagerly.

"Look at it this way: any command which prevents a being from using his natural defence mechanisms under circumstances of stress must be essentially unstable by virtue of its anti-survival nature. In fact I would be inclined to guess that over a period of time the mind would eliminate such a conditioning by its own natural processes."

"The supreme council would have thought of that one," said Keenan regretfully. "Rest assured that they checked experimentally on the time element. As for erasures, or superimposing—where are you going to get hold of a Grenbach Integrator on a planet at this stage of scientific development?"

"You're not quite with me, Pether," Warnock said. "I was on Grenbachs at one time, you know. They stem from the same branch of development as our little sub-vocs, although they are immensely more powerful and able to probe much deeper. The materials to build a Grenbach are not available on Earth, but from what you have just been telling me there is in existence something of which both the Grenbach and the sub-vocs are just feeble mechanical analogies—a naturally telepathic, human mind."

Keenan felt an insane desire to laugh. "My God! Do you realise what you're saying?"

Warnock nodded gravely. "It is the only way we can regain the power to defend ourselves."

"For years we have been robbing the sensitives of their powers by placing inhibitors in their brains. What kind of sense do you think your suggestion would make to them?"

"It *could* be done, if we could reach one of them and allow him to probe into one of our minds deep enough to see the real reasons for our actions," Warnock said.

"A pretty theory," admitted Keenan. "But the first, and damning snag is the fact that as soon as one of us did cut his sub-voc protective pattern in the vicinity of one of these sensitives, his mind would be torn apart. They wouldn't wait to reason with us, Warnock." He shuddered at the memory

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of Pattin's writhing death. "You have no idea of the power at their command."

"I can well imagine," conceded Warnock. "Even the Grenbachs are only small stuff compared with the power at the disposal of a true telepathic sensitive. Anrael had a number of theories on that . . ."

Keenan heard the sound of a vehicle in the road. Moving to the window he saw a car stop opposite the house. The man in the raincoat walked over and bent down to talk to someone in its interior.

"Why are they watching, if they have already got Pelee?"

"Probably just routine," Warnock said. "I think we're safe enough here for a while. You say that Lockyer's place was being watched?"

"Yes, but Megoran and I managed to get rid of the man they had outside. If everything went all right Megoran and Lockyer will be at Megoran's place by now." Keenan pointed to the communicator. "How long will it take you to get this thing working?"

"I don't think it can be done."

"Then we've got to find some way of fighting back—it's our only chance," said Keenan. "But first, we've got to get Pelee Huizinger out of the hands of the police. Where are they holding him?"

"At police headquarters in the city, as far as I know. I don't know how you're going to get him out of there—the place is like a fortress," Warnock said.

"I can't blast my way in, that's for sure," said Keenan thoughtfully. "There must be *some* way of getting in there, though."

"And out?"

"There's *got* to be." Keenan looked down at the table. "Isn't there anything amongst all this electronic gear that would help?"

"As a weapon, you mean?"

"No, that's out. As soon as I tried to use it I would fold up. It's got to be something more subtle—something that would enable me to walk in there without the use of force of any kind . . ."

"There is one possibility—but it would be sure to attract the attention of any sensitive in the area, and it might be dangerous for you personally."

"What is it?" Keenan asked.

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" A reciprocal imagery amplifier, used in conjunction with your sub-voc."

Keenan slammed his fist on the table. " I think you've hit it, Warnock. You mean one of those therapy instruments they use on neurotics back home. What's the danger? I used one back in medical school."

" Yes, but this wouldn't be a normal, carefully timed therapy period. It would be no good building in the usual cut-out device, or it might let you down right in the middle of the operation. The cut-outs are normally set well below tolerance, of course, but it would be better to leave the whole thing under your voluntary control. The other point is the subliminal radiation. Any sensitive or sub-voc used within ten miles couldn't fail to spot you. You would be a sitting target for the opposition group."

" I'll give it a try," said Keenan briskly. " How long? "

" You've already got an important component there in your sub-voc," Warnock said. " It shouldn't take too long."

" Fine ! Get to work on it," said Keenan.

XII.

Keenan stood for a moment contemplating the ugly bulk of the police headquarters. Somewhere in the depths of the building was Pelee Huizinger. He walked up the steps towards the main entrance, feeling the slight drag of the reciprocal imagery amplifier which had been added to his normal sub-voc harness. He wished that he had been able to spare more time to test Warnock's workmanship. Both his own and Pelee's life depended on its functioning perfectly.

He walked straight past the policeman on duty at the door and into the high vaulted entrance hall. His footsteps echoed hollowly on the stone floor, increasing the oppressive prison atmosphere of the place. He ignored the door to his right marked : ' ENQUIRIES ', and moved on towards the broad stairway.

A tall, red-faced man in uniform was coming down the stairs towards him. He eyed Keenan with the casual, yet practised air of his profession.

" Am I right for the chief's office? " asked Keenan with a forced brightness.

" Head of the stairs and turn right," rumbled the other. " Third door along—but there's somebody in with him right now."

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"Thanks—I can wait," Keenan said. This was ideal for his purpose; he did not want to walk straight in on the Chief. First he must do some investigation of his subject if the plan was to work out.

He reached the top of the stairs and stood for a moment. He switched on his sub-voc, searching. There was a momentary surge of crashing energy into his mind, but even before he had time to damp out his sub-voc again it was gone.

A convulsive trembling passed through his body. There was a sensitive nearby, alert and watching. Keenan eased a clammy palm down the seam of his trousers. The whole project had suddenly taken on a different aspect, and he saw himself as a fly walking right into the spider web of the sensitive's influence. But there was no sense in turning back now. He would still be under the observation of the sensitive —whatever happened he was marked.

He thrust the growing fear from his mind and moved along the corridor until he stood opposite the door of the Chief's office. On the other side of the door he detected a female sub-vocal stream. The Chief's secretary was considering in detail the events of the previous night. The interior monologue drivelled on, descending into the intimate, private details of her love life.

Further away, in the inner office, Keenan detected two sub-vocal streams, both of them male. One was that of a detective named Platt, who was making a whining rebuttal of charges of corruption. There were snatches of obscenity which floated to the top of the man's consciousness and a constant stream of hate for the Chief. Keenan turned away from this stream slightly nauseated at the roiling corruption, and concentrated on the other.

Platt's protestations were doing him absolutely no good in the eyes of the Chief; Keenan detected that from the first burst of sub-vocalisation. The Chief was evidently a strong, hard man with a keen sense of duty and a ruthless attitude towards anyone who did not live up to his own standards.

Keenan followed the conversation and the implicated thoughts of the Chief for a few moments, acquainting himself with their pattern. The task was not going to be an easy one, faced as he was with a strong-willed, well integrated mind. On previous occasions when he had made use of a reciprocal magery amplifier it had been either with the willing co-operation of a fellow student, or upon the mind of a patient

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whose will to resist had been previously sapped by the use of sedative drugs.

Keenan tapped lightly on the door of the outer office and walked in. The girl was sitting at a desk opposite him, rummaging in her handbag. She looked up and a shadow of annoyance passed over her face at the sight of another visitor and the possibility of a delay in her departure. Keenan restrained a smile as he caught an unflattering sub-vocal description of himself as seen through the eyes of the girl.

" Good afternoon, Miss Bates," he said quietly.

There was a momentary confusion in the mind of the girl. " The Chief is engaged," she said abruptly. " *It's nearly two minutes to six* "—said her mind—" *what the hell do you want*?"

" That's all right; there's no reason for you to stay." Keenan smiled at the girl and lowered himself into a chair. " I'll just wait here until Sergeant Platt comes out, then I'll go on in. The Chief is expecting me—it will be quite all right."

The girl relaxed in the face of his easy familiarity, although there still remained a background of puzzlement as to how this newcomer, this apparent stranger, knew both her name and that of the detective who was in with the Chief.

" Well, if you say it's all right . . . sir." She rose from behind the desk. " I've got a bus to catch, you see."

Keenan nodded sympathetically. " Just you go right ahead."

The girl returned his smile and walked out of the office. Keenan settled back in his chair, feeling under his coat and activated the reciprocal imagery amplifier. A few minutes alone here in this office, with his intended subject in the next room, was ideal for the purpose of testing and aligning the instrument in readiness for the coming interview. As yet he had not decided on the best identity shell to use—that would come from a detailed check of the memory images of the Chief which he could now carry out.

The amplifier was warming up now, and Keenan closed his eyes to give his full attention to the probing process. A blurred impression of the face of the detective in the next room formed in his mind. He made a slight adjustment and the image sharpened, giving him a clear view of the man and his surroundings, just as if he, Keenan was the Chief, sitting behind the desk. Alongside the visual imagery the field of the

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amplifier adapted his own vibrations in the emotional spectrum with those of the Chief and induced an artificial empathy. A wave of indignation and annoyance at the evasiveness of the detective swept through him.

The sense of identity and power of integration of the Chief was strong, and it threatened to engulf Keenan. He stepped up the amplification.

The Chief trailed off in mid-sentence, his right hand moving swiftly to his head as a dart of white hot pain shot through his skull. For a moment he sat quite still and silent, looking blankly at the man in front of him. What was it he had wanted Platt for? Something to do with the Marvin Park murder, wasn't it? Yes, that was it. Gregory would be calling along some time today with the necessary authority to take away the prisoner Huizinger.

Damn it! What was all this security nonsense, anyway? Didn't they trust him? Jameson was resentful of the fact that he would be called on to hand over his prisoner with no other explanation than that it was a security matter. Another thing, why had they clamped down on the press reports on the murder? He had had a tough time squaring the news black-out with the local newspapers.

He wondered again who had phoned through the information that there had been a murder in the first place. There were too many strange things happening in the name of security these days.

Chief Jameson realised that Platt was looking at him strangely. "You were in on the Marvin Park arrest, weren't you?" asked the Chief.

"Yes, sir." Platt's sullen face brightened.

"Did you notice anything unusual about this Huizinger? I know you put in a report on his statement, but was there anything else you haven't mentioned?"

"Like what, Chief?" Platt looked puzzled. "I remember thinking that he didn't look like the type to commit a brutal crime like that—but then, they very seldom do."

Jameson glanced at the manilla folder which lay near his right hand. Background material, that was the trouble—there didn't seem to be any on this Huizinger. His policeman's instincts were aroused. Soon Gregory would arrive back from London with the necessary authority and the

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prisoner would be out of his hands forever. But before that happened the Chief wanted a few more answers for his own satisfaction.

"Go down to the cells and get Huizinger up here," he said.

Platt rose from his chair. "Yes, sir. Shall I call Sergeant Lewis—he was in on the arrest too?"

"No, I've already had his report. I want to talk to the man himself."

"Yes, sir." Platt turned and headed for the door. What had happened to the old man in there? Things had been getting really sticky for a moment, and then he had suddenly switched on to this business about Huizinger. It had been just as if the Chief had had a sudden complete lapse of memory. Platt walked quickly through the outer office, hardly noticing the man who sat near the door.

Keenan watched the detective leave, then rose to his feet and made for the door of the inner office. With a bit of the right kind of luck this was going to be all right after all. Jameson, despite his forbidding exterior, was a highly suggestible type. The way Keenan had been able to blank out the Chief's train of thought in the middle of a conversation and set in motion a chain of association leading to Huizinger, had proved that. From then on, the existing situation as it was pictured in Jameson's mind was sufficient to give Keenan his course of action. He had managed to probe all the Chief's sensory reactions to this Gregory, and his mental image of the man. With the help of the reciprocal imagery amplifier he would be able to assume the identity of Gregory in the eyes of Jameson.

The only things that nagged at his mind were the possibility of intervention by the sensitive he had detected earlier, or the arrival of the real Gregory. Dismissing these qualms from his mind Keenan pushed the amplifier up to full power and walked boldly into the room. The first impression was the most important, if sufficiently strong the pattern would then persist in the mind of Jameson.

"Good evening, Chief," Keenan said. His whole attention concentrated on the task of projecting back into Jameson's mind the image of Gregory which he had probed from it with sufficient power to convince the man that *he* was Gregory.

Jameson looked up from the papers on his desk. He frowned, screwing up his eyes, and passed a hand over his

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forehead. His vision was blurred temporarily as Keenan short-circuited his eyes and fed the image directly into the sensory centres of his brain. There was a slight alarm reaction, but it checked as the image flowed in and held steadily.

"I had not expected you back so soon." There was resentment in Jameson's tone.

"I completed my business in London quickly," said Keenan. He wanted to keep the conversation down to an absolute minimum, to enable him to concentrate on maintaining his grip on the mind of Jameson. Platt would be back any moment with Pelee Huizinger. That would be a difficult moment. There was no possibility of contacting Pelee by sub-voc under the circumstances, but he hoped that the other would guess what was going on and play up to it. His other worry was Platt—but luckily the man had never met Gregory and so had no reason to question any orders the Chief might give him.

"You have the authority?" asked Jameson.

Keenan removed a blank sheet of paper from his pocket and placed it in the Chief's outstretched hand. "Yes—I think this should satisfy you."

Jameson examined the sheet carefully, whilst Keenan fed back into his mind the impression of an official typed order, complete with Ministry heading and signature, which the man expected to see.

"Yes. This seems to be correct." Jameson spoke gruffly. "Look, Gregory, do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I do," said Keenan, with just the right tone of superiority. An anger reaction in Jameson would make it more difficult to maintain control of his mind, but he could not afford to involve himself in a long discussion.

"Very well," said Jameson. "The whole thing seems most irregular to me, but I can't argue with people on this level." He placed the blank paper on the desk beside him and picked up his phone. "Have Sergeant Platt bring up the prisoner Huizinger, will you?" He rang off quickly, obviously to forestall any remark on the part of the person at the other end of the line that Platt was already on his way with the prisoner.

Keenan glanced covertly at his watch. He was already approaching the usual tolerance time for the use of a reciprocal imagery amplifier, and he could feel a growing tension as his mind rebelled against the rigid discipline he was forcing on it.

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The easier, more obvious course now would be to go out of Jameson's presence and intercept Platt as he brought Huizinger along the corridor. But he had to dig Jameson's mind further and probe any further information he could find on Gregory.

"I'm sorry to have to use these methods," he said. "I quite realise that you must resent my interference in this way, but it cannot be helped. You must just take my word for it that this is no ordinary murder."

"I have gathered that much," returned Jameson dryly. "Would you mind telling me just what kind of a murder it has to be to interest your department?"

"I can't be very helpful to you there, Chief, but you should have a good idea." Mentally Keenan was all attention, hoping that this train of thought would lead Jameson on. But the effort was fruitless, he could only suppose that the Chief knew no more about the function or nature of the department with which Gregory was associated than had already been revealed.

"Very well, Gregory, I won't embarrass you by trying to understand your security charades," replied Jameson bitingly.

Keenan ignored the remark. He wondered how much longer Platt and Huizinger would be. The tension in his mind was growing every second and he was beginning to doubt that he would be able to maintain control of Jameson's imagery much longer. Further to that there were the possible residual effects of the radiation of the amplifier on his own brain. Warnock had been hazy on that point, but there were obviously very good reasons why the normal use of reciprocal imagery amplifiers was restricted to a definite short period.

"Will this case ever be brought to trial?" asked Jameson.

Keenan felt his mind drifting and snapped himself back with a jerk. "That does not rest in my hands," he said curtly.

There was a sound of footsteps in the outer office and someone rapped on the door.

"Come in," shouted Jameson.

Keenan half turned in his seat as the door opened and Pelee Huizinger entered, followed closely by the detective. Huizinger started as he saw Keenan, but quickly regained control of himself and focused his eyes on Jameson awaiting a lead.

"Well, Huizinger, it seems that you are leaving us," said Jameson. "Mr. Gregory here has his own plans for you. I

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trust he will find you more talkative than have my men. I take it that you have no complaints about your treatment here?"

"No, sir," Huizinger replied.

"Good." The Chief turned his attention back to Keenan. "He's all yours. I'll have Platt help you escort him down to your car."

"That won't be necessary," said Keenan, rising.

"Very well—he's your prisoner . . . now," Jameson said. He made as if to offer his hand to Keenan, and then thought better of it. "Good evening, Gregory. I trust we shall be able to work together again."

His sarcasm was lost on Keenan, whose entire capacity of will was required to prevent himself from relaxing the pressure on his mind in the only possible way, by shutting off the reciprocal imagery amplifier. His mind was barely floating on a sea of pain. There was a shuddering, grinding vibration inside his skull, growing more intense every second, as the radiation of the amplifier saturated his brain tissue.

He nodded briefly to Jameson and turned to Huizinger, who was looking at him with questioning eyes.

"Come with me, please." The two of them walked out of the Chief's office.

"Pether, what . . . ?" commenced Huizinger as soon as the door closed behind them.

Keenan shook his head violently and placed a hand to his lips. He was still maintaining contact with the mind of the Chief, until they were out in the corridor. Just in case Jameson decided to come to the door and watch them leave.

Once out in the corridor they started walking towards the head of the stairs. Keenan was monitoring the conversation which had begun between Jameson and Platt. There seemed to be no danger from that quarter.

With a sigh of relief he slipped his hand inside his jacket and cut off the reciprocal imagery amplifier at last. The vibration, the aching pressure died immediately. Only to be replaced instantly by a rush of power as his mind was probed by a sensitive.

Consciousness reeled and darkness moved in on him as his sensory channels protested against this renewed abuse. Then,

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as suddenly as it had come, the contact was gone, replaced by an absolute blankness. But the shock was such that he stumbled and fell against the wall, reaching vainly for support.

The blackness retreated and he was aware of a sound, nothing from human speech, but a guttural, choking noise dragged from a human throat. He was on his knees looking down at the polished wood floor of the corridor. In his head was an absolute ice coldness after the pressing torture; almost as if the pain could only go so far and then, reaching a limit, had cancelled itself out entirely.

Huizinger lay unmoving, face downwards, a few feet away.

"Pelee!" Keenan dragged himself to his feet and hurrying over bent close to his friend. He eased Huizinger over onto his back.

Pelee's face was a contorted mask, blotched by gorged and burst blood vessels, with eyes that stared upwards blankly, in something beyond horror. His limbs were quite rigid with a muscle-cracking stiffness, and the fingers of his hands were twisted in an impossible, manic pattern.

All human beings carry within themselves the seed of death. In his training period in medical college Keenan had witnessed one case which had resulted in a corpse of similar appearance. That patient had been suffering from a degenerative disease of the cerebral vortex, which had in its last stages touched off a sudden emotional explosion which pulled out all the stops of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in instant death. It was possible that a telepathic sensitive probing deep into the mind of another human could touch off such an explosion. In fact that seemed the only explanation. If so, why had the victim been Pelee, rather than himself?

Keenan looked quickly up and down the corridor. There was no one in sight. He gazed again into the contorted face of his friend. There was nothing that could be done for him now. Huizinger had been killed at the moment he had opened up his sub-voc and attempted to make contact with Keenan. The poor devil had no idea of what was waiting for him.

Keenan straightened up. His task lay with the living. He walked quickly down the stairs, leaving the body where it lay.

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XIII.

The car was where he had left it, in a nearby side street. Keenan leapt inside and started the engine. Only now as he was seated there for a moment, looking through the windscreen at the flowing normality of the city traffic did the bizarre horror of what had happened make its full impact on his consciousness. There was still a blank, anaesthetised coldness in part of his mind, the aftermath of his excessive use of the reciprocal imagery amplifier. His flight from the police building had been merely on an animal fear response level, but there was no flight possible from such an enemy.

Somewhere in the area was a sensitive, who even now might be observing him, waiting for the right moment to blast the life from his body. For years, even before his project training, Keenan had considered the wonder of being a telepathic sensitive and thought that any being so gifted would be something more than a man, something nearer to a God. Now he realised that his conception had been entirely false, an idealistic dream. A telepathic sensitive, for all his gifts was still a man, with all a man's frailties and a greater number of temptations. Something less than a man, possibly, because he held in his mind a destructive force which could render him a menace to human life—a power which could wreak his vengeance on any normal human who dared to oppose him. Perhaps they had been right, those Lessigians of long ago who had destroyed the telepaths in their midst.

But ethical considerations were not important now. He had to find a way in which he and the other Lessigians could survive until the relief ship arrived to rescue them from this planet.

Keenan drove swiftly through the gathering dusk towards the Marvin Park area, glancing frequently in his driving mirror. But there was no sign of any pursuit. The dull coldness was gradually receding from his mind as he turned into the street in which Anrael's house stood. The watcher was still there, leaning in a shop doorway. He would have to drive on past and park round the corner, approaching the house from the back way again.

"*Pether—is that you?*" Warnock's question formed in his mind with absolute clarity as he pulled into the side of the road and stopped by the ornamental gates of the playing field. He realised with a shock of fear that his sub-voc must have been

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wide open ever since the death of Huizinger. And yet the sensitive had not blasted him ! Nor had he been aware of the radiation of the telepath's surveillance. Was it possible that the contact had been broken in some way? Hope surged in him.

" *Yes. Come down here. We're going back to London,*" he replied.

" *All right. I've cannibalised a few odds and ends from this communicator. It may still be possible to make something out of that low-power job of Lockyer's—enough to reach a ship in the vicinity, at any rate.*"

" *Good. Get moving, I don't want to hang around here too long.*"

" *I'm on my way.*" replied Warnock. " *Where's Pelee?* "

Keenan's stomach knotted. " *I don't want to think about it, Warnock.*"

" *You mean you didn't make it?* " asked Warnock angrily. " *What are you doing back here without him?* "

" *He's dead, dead, DEAD !* "

" *No ! What do you mean?* "

Keenan slumped sickly over the wheel of the car. " *There was a sensitive monitoring the whole thing. Just as we were leaving the building I blacked out completely. When I came to Pelee was lying beside me—dead. The sensitive must have blasted him as soon as he opened his sub-voc to communicate with me.*"

" *You didn't warn him?* "

" *There was no time . . .* "

Footsteps were approaching quickly now. Keenan looked up and saw the dim figure of Warnock standing by the car.

" All right, Pether. Move over, I'll take it from here." Warnock opened the driving seat door and slipped in behind the wheel as Keenan moved over. He gunned the engine into life. The car did a swift turn and headed out of the side street.

" I'm sorry about Pelee," said Warnock gruffly, his eyes on the road. " Maybe we would have been better to have left him there."

Keenan looked down at his clenched hands. Why did Warnock have to say that? True, if they had left Huizinger he would at least have been alive. But for how long? No. It was better to have tried—Pelee would have appreciated that.

" You say you blacked out? "

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"Yes, the moment I cut off the reciprocal imagery amplifier."

Warnock flashed a glance at his companion. "Just how long did you have it on?"

"Five . . . minutes, possibly."

Warnock nodded. "And after you came to again—how did you feel?"

"There wasn't much time for feeling. I had to get out of there."

"But your sub-voc, surely you didn't leave that wide open after what had happened to Pelee? And yet when you came into this area I detected you immediately, your signal was loud and strong."

"There was a numbness in my head—I wasn't even aware of the existence of my sub-voc."

"Probably more like ten minutes with that amplifier," Warnock said. "Another few seconds and you would have been dead too. I warned you to be careful. You must have overloaded your sub-voc and temporarily paralysed some of your neural circuits. As far as the sensitive was concerned, for the time at lease, you might as well have been dead. Your mind would cease to radiate on the sublimal plane and become completely transparent to his scanning. You were lucky, Keenan."

"And now?"

"It's back to normal, or you wouldn't be able to use your sub-voc as you were doing just now. But I wouldn't try using a reciprocal imagery amplifier again for some time, if I were you."

"I still keep thinking about Pelee, lying there . . . twisted."

"Forget it. You did your best," Warnock said quietly. "I said the wrong thing just now—but I liked Pelee a lot too." The car halted at an intersection red light. "Where to now?"

Keenan realised that the burden of command had been passed back to him. "Keep your sub-voc on a tight shielding pattern and pray that sensitive is not anywhere in this area. We must get back to London."

"How do we know that they're not following us at a distance, with the sensitive monitoring?"

"We don't," Keenan said grimly. "We've got to take a chance. If they are, and one of us opened up to check he would be blasted straight away. I'll try it later on, but first I want to get well out of the city."

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"Are you sure that it was the same people who killed Anrael?"

"Who else? I know the method was different, but they must have had their reasons for that. For one thing, I don't believe there can be more than a very few sensitives amongst them. They would be reserved for special assignments . . ."

"Like trailing us?" said Warnock. "What do we do when we get back to London?"

"First we see if you can get that communicator working, so that we can contact a ship. If that fails, we shall have to find some effective way of keeping alive until the regular relief arrives." Keenan leaned back, his eyes closed, as the car leapt along the darkening road, wondering what they would find when they reached London. He was beginning to believe that the holding of Huizinger had been nothing more than a bait to lure him to Birmingham, so that he might lead the enemy back to the new headquarters of the London group. They could have killed Pelee at any time, if that was all they wanted.

The journey passed uneventfully, Keenan lowering his shielding pattern several times without result. Megoran lived in a large modern block of flats, situated on the south bank of the Thames. Keenan and Warnock left the car in the courtyard and took an elevator to the fifth floor.

A thin, neatly dressed man, with darkly greying hair, opened the door as Keenan's finger moved away from the bell-push.

"Fulby!" said Warnock. "I didn't expect to see you here. When did you get back?" He turned. "I don't think you've met Pether Keenan."

Fulby shook Keenan's hand gravely. "No, with my roving assignment I see little of the rest of the project. There will be more work for you people in Europe shortly, by the way."

Keenan walked into the airy, cream-painted hallway. "There are more urgent things than that at the moment." He glanced around. "Where is Lockyer?"

"Through there in the lounge," indicated Fulby. "Just how serious is this thing? The old man seems pretty shaken up."

"About as bad as it could be," said Keenan curtly. "Anrael and Huizinger are both dead."

"No!" Fulby placed a restraining hand on Keenan's arm. "Look, perhaps you had better wait until Megoran

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gets back before breaking this to Lockyer. I'm not sure how he might take it."

"You want to spare his feelings?" Keenan jerked his arm free. "Don't you realise that if it hadn't been for Lockyer we would not be in this mess? If he had let me go to Birmingham sooner I might have been able to save the lives of both Anrael and Huizinger." He walked along and pushed open the door of the lounge.

In one corner of the dimly lit room Keenan saw the gaunt profile of Lockyer bent over a Vion detector. He stood waiting awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, his impatience growing as the old man did not acknowledge awareness of his presence. Finally he walked across and looked over Lockyer's shoulder at the screen.

In addition to the cluster of dots that were the sub-vocs of the occupants of the flat, over on the right of the screen, almost at the edge of the detection area was the pulsating spiral of light which indicated the presence of an uninhibited sensitive.

Lockyer looked up at the sound of Keenan's smothered exclamation. "Good evening, Pether. I watched your arrival. Who is with you?"

"Warnock—the only one of the Birmingham section left alive," Keenan said. "Both Anrael and Huizinger are dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that, truly sorry. I had great faith in Anrael."

Keenan was infuriated by the man's mild tone. "Damn it, Lockyer! Didn't you hear what I said? They are *dead*."

"I hear you," said Lockyer impassively. "But what can I do? We must accept these things."

"Without fighting back?"

Lockyer rose to his feet, there was weariness in his movements. "That again, Keenan? I explained to you before. We *cannot* fight."

"Even though Anrael was brutally murdered, battered to death in his own home; and Huizinger killed by a sensitive, using his mental powers as a weapon?"

"And the communicator?"

That was all he was thinking of. His personal safety, a way of escape, thought Keenan disgustedly. "A total wreck. Unless Warnock can find some way of modifying the one you have here there is no hope of us making contact with Lessigia."

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He pointed to the screen. " Don't you realise? All this is of no use now."

" My orders are to carry out the inhibition of all sensitives," Lockyer said. " I see no reason to disobey them. This case is particularly important because the mother is not a sensitive and there is therefore no inhibitor in her brain to prevent rapport between herself and the child." A dot of light detached itself from the area of the sensitive's emanation and commenced to move slowly towards the centre of the screen.

" That is Megoran. He has been investigating the case and preparing for inhibition immediately after birth."

Keenan stared at his superior. The man seemed totally fixated with the carrying out of this routine operation—it was incredible.

" Don't you understand, Lockyer? The removal of the inhibitor from the mind of Dashiell was just a beginning. One by one they will find the sensitives we have inhibited and

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restore their powers. The matter is out of our control now—for every sensitive you inhibit they will carry out the reverse process. More than that; with every sensitive they uninhibit another killer joins their ranks and begins the hunt for us. Make no mistake about that, they are killers. I managed to escape them in Birmingham, but it can only be a matter of time before they wipe us out."

"No, Keenan." Lockyer's expression was almost exalted, his head erect as he stared into the face of the younger man. "You probably think I am callous in my attitude about the deaths of Anrael and Huizinger. That is because you misunderstand—you always have. They died laying down their lives for the project, because they believed, as I do, in the glory of its ultimate ideal."

"Pelee Huizinger died in horrible agony on the floor of an alien building," gritted Keenan. "There was no glory in that." He was at a loss to understand the attitude of the old man. Panic or anger he might have expected, but this quiet pride was beyond him.

"What do you want me to say?" Lockyer asked quietly. "The death of Anrael is a deep personal loss to me. Huizinger was your dear friend—can talk bring them back?"

"But they could have been saved if you had moved quicker," said Keenan angrily.

"Perhaps. But it is too late now."

Keenan stood with clenched fists as the old man, his head erect and proud, walked quietly past him and out of the room.

"You see what we're up against?" he said to Warnock. "What chance do we stand with such a leader?"

"I may be able to do something with the communicator," said the electronics expert gravely. "With luck I shall reach a ship in transit."

Keenan watched moodily as Warnock moved the communicator over to a table and began to dismantle it. Surely there must be something he could do other than just sitting here waiting? The enemy would already be searching London for them. Was he to find them here, cowering defenseless?

The door of the room opened and Fulby entered. Megoran was close behind him.

"Hallo, Pether," said the stocky man. "Fulby has told me what happened in Birmingham. I'm sorry about Huizinger—you and he were pretty close, weren't you?"

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Fulby looked round the room with a puzzled expression. "Where is Lockyer?"

"I don't know. I thought he was with you," Keenan said. "He left here some time ago."

Fulby drifted over to the still live Vion detector. "What's this?" he asked, pointing at a dot which had detached itself from the group at the centre of the screen and was moving slowly away. "I thought we were all in the building."

Megoran, his broad face grim, hurried over and drew the curtain back from the window. "It's Lockyer! He's taken the car I left out there. What's got into the old fool?"

Fulby turned on keenan swiftly. "What happened between you and Lockyer?

"I gave him the facts," Keenan said. "He's supposed to be our leader, remember?"

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Megoran turned from the window. "And told him what you thought of him, I expect. You shouldn't have done that, Pether. I've come to understand Lockyer a great deal more during the last couple of days. *You* might think him a cold-blooded old swine, but that's not true. This project means more to him than either you or I could ever imagine. More than life itself."

"More than the lives of others, you mean," said Keenan hotly. "He could have saved Huizinger and Anrael if he had not been so blinded by his own dreams of playing God."

"Perhaps he *was* to blame in some measure—but believe me, your judgement on him will be mild compared with his own," Megoran said. "There are any number of elements which could have added up to this situation. We are none of us entirely blameless. You yourself made a serious error when you failed to erase that girl Marie Borneman."

Keenan was stunned. "You know about *that*?"

"Of course. Pattin told me. He feared something of the kind and he was checking on you that day. Luckily *he* erased the girl, after you had failed to do so."

"Pattin!" Keenan's heart sank as the dead hand of the tall suave man reached from the grave to pluck all hope of return to Marie from him. He only realised now just how much that hope had meant to him.

Megoran was looking at him questioningly. "Why? Was it *really* that important to you?"

Keenan did not answer. No words could help the anguish that gripped him.

The dot of light that was Lockyer's sub-voc reached the edge of the detector screen and disappeared . . .

To be concluded.

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